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**DEFYING A DECADENT DEMOCRACY:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE WORKS  
OF PAUL BOURGET AND EMILE ZOLA**

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**Jessica Rosalind Irons**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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Graduation year: 2000



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**DEFYING A DECADENT DEMOCRACY:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE WORKS OF PAUL BOURGET AND  
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**Submitted for the degree of M.A. by thesis at the University of Durham  
September 2000**

Facing each other across the bitter political divide between Catholics and Republicans in late nineteenth century France, Paul Bourget and Emile Zola might seem at first glance to have little in common. Bourget, devoutly Catholic and monarchist, was a significant influence on Right wing thought and action: Zola devoted his career to the promotion of a scientific, positivist and anti-clerical Republic. Yet as this thesis seeks to demonstrate, the opposition between Bourget and Zola - and between bourgeois Catholics and Republicans on a wider scale - could conceal not only ambiguity but also considerable consensus, particularly with reference to the question of national decadence.

Focusing on a variety of literary, critical and journalistic works, the thesis illuminates Zola's political and social thought while incorporating original research on Paul Bourget, whose ideological importance has long been neglected. The shared sense of the writer's moral mission is studied as a prelude to a wider investigation of the two novelists' attitudes to political, social and racial decadence, throughout which emphasis is given to common perceptions of the nature of national degeneration. Journalistic campaigns attacking the early Third Republic give an insight into common complaints of political stagnation, and the longing for scientific government and strong leadership; fears of decadence and disorder in the social sphere often reveal a similar degree of bourgeois consensus. Concern at racial degeneration was still more widespread, and frequently crossed political and religious boundaries. Yet while Bourget and Zola shared common preoccupations, their proposed solutions were nonetheless widely divergent, and similarity of mentality could make for irreconcilable differences, especially in the religious domain. This thesis aims to demonstrate how defiance of a decadent democracy co-existed with the inescapable revolutionary legacy, thus giving a three dimensional picture of the depths of conflict and consensus within a divided society.

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## **CONTENTS**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>I. «La passion de la vérité»: the role of the writer in a decadent society</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>II. Utopian solutions to democratic disorders: two critical reactions to the early Third Republic</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>III. The triumph of order: Zola, Bourget and the class struggle</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>IV. Regenerating the nation: from racial decline to the cult of vitality</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>V. Faith in the Future: the Church and decadence</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>135</b>

## INTRODUCTION

«Catholiques ou athées, monarchistes ou républicains, les enfants de cet âge d'angoisse ont tous aux yeux le regard inquiet, au coeur le frisson, aux mains le tremblement de la grande bataille de l'époque.»<sup>1</sup>

If 1870 was a landmark in the history of France, it was also a question mark over the nature of French identity. Shaken by a century of seemingly fruitless revolution, torn between conflicting political traditions, and haunted by the apocalyptic image of a civilisation in decline, the only point of consensus seemed to be the level of anxiety with which the nation regarded its past, present and future. Fears of national degeneration were omnipresent, no less threatening in the social and cultural context than in the political one, and the challenge of presenting potential solutions seemed only to reveal the depth of division already evident in French society.

It is scarcely surprising then that the Third Republic, described by Theodore Zeldin as “one of the most confusing and paradoxical of political regimes”<sup>2</sup> should provoke as much controversy among historians as it did among contemporaries. Certainly on one level the regime could be seen as the expression of irreconcilable conflict between rival forces. Visionary poets like Victor Hugo might portray the Republic in lyrical terms as being France's ultimate destiny,<sup>3</sup> but in 1870 such an outcome was far from inevitable. As Robert Gildea argues, the birth of the Third Republic was little more than an accident emerging from military defeat,<sup>4</sup> and the possibility of a royal restoration was initially a very real one. Even though attempts to

<sup>1</sup> P. Bourget *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1899) p.68

<sup>2</sup> T. Zeldin *France 1848-1945* (Oxford, OUP, 1979) Volume I *Ambition, Love and Politics* p.570

<sup>3</sup> «Qu'on s'y oppose ou non, qu'on s'y consente ou non, la République, toute illusion laissée de côté, est l'avenir prochain ou lointain, mais inévitable, des nations.» V. Hugo *Les Châtiments* (Paris, Editions Quantin, 1884) p.75

<sup>4</sup> R. Gildea *The Third Republic from 1870-1914* (London, Longman, 1988) p.1



rally monarchical forces were undermined by the inability of rival pretenders either to co-operate or to accept the proposal of a constitutional monarchy, there is no denying the latent strength of conservative and royalist sentiments. Especially in the early Third Republic, Catholicism was a potent force: in 1870 there were 56,500 priests in total, the highest figure to be reached that century,<sup>5</sup> and, before the Republican reforms which sought to limit their influence, the clergy represented a dynamic network. While it may appear simplistic to identify royalist sympathies with Catholicism, and Republican loyalty with anti-clericalism, such identifications are not without meaning. As Roger Price has emphasised, the Catholic Church participated quite openly in a wider conservative and often reactionary alliance, and deterred many potential supporters by its overt condemnation of social and industrial change.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the attitudes of individual Catholics, the official stance of the Church was rigid and uncompromising: Pope Pius IX's notorious *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) condemned some eighteen major "errors" of the times in no uncertain terms, and most clergy seemed determined to support every aspect of the existing social hierarchy. Although Pope Leo XIII attempted to alleviate political tension with his policy of *Ralliement* which encouraged Catholics to accept Republican regimes, there is clear evidence that many had difficulty in following his advice. Indeed, not only did the French Church dislike the Republic, but in the early 1870s it also provided blatant support for the Bourbon cause. A deliberate attempt was made to present Catholics as the true patriots, seeking to redeem France from the iniquitous state that had provoked the divine punishment of 1870, and pilgrimages to Paray-le-Monial, which took place annually in the 1870s, were a clear focus for the political Right.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> R. Price *A Social History of Nineteenth-Century France* (London, Hutchinson, 1979) p.261

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.270

<sup>7</sup> R. Gibson *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914* (London, Routledge, 1989) p.148



The Republicans themselves, however, were not entirely exempt from blame in the creation of such divisions. Although measures of secularisation were meant to demonstrate a principle of State neutrality, hostility towards the church was often explicit as well as implicit – “nothing”, as Denis Brogan remarks, “could exceed the rigorous orthodoxy of Republican agnosticism.”<sup>8</sup> The Third Republic thus saw the Church increasingly deprived of wealth and influence: primary schools were secularised in the 1880s, the syllabus inspired by a strictly Republican morality, and members of the clergy and religious orders were increasingly banned from teaching. Religious orders themselves were required to have State permission in 1901, an act which culminated in the separation of Church and State in 1905, and although such measures were not theoretically intended to be vindictive, there is evidence that they were sometimes so in practice.<sup>9</sup>

The Third Republic was still further complicated by the fact that Republicans themselves were equally, if not more divided: hence the transitory existence of 108 ministries between 1870 and 1940.<sup>10</sup> Certainly there was by 1870 a legacy of Republican tradition and ideology, but it was far from monolithic, with Gambetta standing for a dictatorial and patriotic regime, Thiers defending a more liberal and parliamentary approach, and Blanqui symbolising the potential for insurrection.<sup>11</sup> The Constitution of 1875 was clearly a compromise,<sup>12</sup> and the initial establishment of the Republic owed much to Gambetta’s shrewdly organised tour of France in 1871, during which he sought to reassure the public that the regime would favour both order and stability. The violence of the Commune - during which the *Communards* burnt public

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<sup>8</sup> D. Brogan *The French Nation 1814-1940* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1957) p.173

<sup>9</sup> R. Anderson *France 1870-1914: Politics and Society* (London, Routledge and Paul, 1984) p.23

<sup>10</sup> Gildea, *The Third Republic*, p.11

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

buildings and executed their hostages - had stirred deep fears of class warfare, and the desire for order and suspicion of Extreme Left ideology were consequently intense.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it was not until 1875 that the Republicans attained a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, and in 1879 that a majority in the Senate was acquired. Even when the Republic seemed to be securely established, the threat of instability was never long absent - as the Boulangist movement and Dreyfus affair demonstrated only too clearly.

Certainly the divisions which challenged the Third Republic are undeniable. Yet on a deeper level, some historians have argued for a degree of cohesion and stability which, if it does not undermine this vision of the Republic, nonetheless renders it more complex and three-dimensional. Robert Gildea has pointed out that, although the Third Republic witnessed a remarkably rapid succession of ministries, most of the changes involved a mere re-ordering of existing ministers, and the ruling Republicans were overwhelmingly drawn from the more elite sections of the bourgeoisie.<sup>14</sup> It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that the conservative nature of the Republic should have become a focus for such debate, with frequent accusations of a backward looking or stalemate society. In *La Grande Bourgeoisie au Pouvoir* (1960), Jean Lhomme claimed that the same section of society held power for the duration of the period from 1830 to 1880, and Emmanuel Beau de Loménie further argued that this was a hereditary power held by only a handful of families.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, during the 1870s and 1880s the Republic was accused by many fervent Republicans – including Emile Zola – of denying its most fundamental principles, and Pouget, leader of a militant workers' group, published a newspaper entitled *Père Peinard* which accused Marianne of being entirely faithless.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *France 1870-1914*, p.8

<sup>14</sup> Gildea, *The Third Republic*, p.11

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Anderson, *France 1870-1914*, pp.33-35

<sup>16</sup> R. Magraw *France 1815-1914: The Bourgeois Century* (London, Fontana, 1983) p.295

Was there perhaps more in common between Republican supporters and detractors than either faction would have cared to admit? Theodore Zeldin in particular has suggested that anti-clerical Republicans and Catholic royalists were so caught up in contention that they often overlooked their potential basis for understanding.<sup>17</sup> Each side was so consciously and instinctively defensive that it failed to perceive the broadly similar mentality characterising many bourgeois observers of the Republic, regardless of their ideological positions. This is a contentious hypothesis, severely challenged by Ralph Gibson, who argues that revisionism can be taken too far, and by René Rémond, who emphasises the complete incompatibility of the conflicting ideologies.<sup>18</sup> Yet the degree of consensus, not least regarding criticism of the regime for its social and political decadence, is worthy of closer consideration.

The question of decadence in the Third Republic is an inescapable one. The word derives from the Latin *cadere* (to fall)<sup>19</sup> – and while the term itself is not classical Latin, the concept of decadence as political decline had existed since classical times.<sup>20</sup> In the late nineteenth century, however, decadence began to acquire an unprecedented and paradoxical dual meaning – not only did it evoke images of political deterioration, but it also came to symbolise the cult of decline as something both corrupt and alluring.<sup>21</sup> Thus while some merely lamented the decay of the nation, others took a distinct pleasure in so doing – although moralists and apologists alike tended to portray decadence as the dissipation of energy and willpower, and the loss of political, social and individual coherence.

<sup>17</sup> T. Zeldin *France 1848-1945* (Oxford, OUP, 1980) Volume II *Intellect, Taste and Anxiety* p.994

<sup>18</sup> R. Gibson "Republicans versus Catholics in late nineteenth-century France" in F. Tallet and N. Atkin (Eds.) *Religion, Society and Politics in France since 1789* (London, Hambledon, 1991) p. 109

<sup>19</sup> E. Weber "Decadence on a private income" in *Journal of Contemporary History* no. 17 (1982) p.1

<sup>20</sup> M. Calinescu *Faces of Modernity: Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (London, Indiana University Press, 1977) p.1

<sup>21</sup> A. Carter *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830-1900* (Toronto University Press, 1958) p.

The prevalence of this concept of decadence is much debated. A.E. Carter maintains that it was “the settled opinion”<sup>22</sup> – but this is arguably an exaggeration, for as Koenraad Swart points out, the idea was most prevalent among intellectuals, and was in a sense the necessary reaction to a more general optimism.<sup>23</sup> Yet if decadence was the concern of a minority, it was indisputably a vocal minority, and one that was widely influential in both political and social domains until the end of the century. The humiliating defeat at Sedan heralded a period of nervous introspection, and pamphlets of the early 1870s made no secret of predominant fears, with titles such as *La Fin du Monde Latin, Des Causes de la Décadence Française*<sup>24</sup> and *République ou Décadence?*<sup>25</sup> Politicians from Jean Jaurès to Charles Maurras were highly preoccupied with the link between national defeat and racial inferiority, and dreaded the potential chaos that might ensue.<sup>26</sup> Maurras increasingly suspected France of suffering from racial debasement, Barrès and Sorel pointed to an incriminating lack of national energy, and both sides in the Dreyfus affair interpreted the crisis as being caused by the decadence of the Republic.<sup>27</sup> Indeed from the early Third Republic onwards the term was liberally applied to any threat of social upheaval, particularly those seen to be arising from heredity, where the link with degeneration was believed to be self-evident.

The myth of decadence was a widely felt phenomenon impossible to limit to any one interest group,<sup>28</sup> yet it seems nonetheless to have attained particular

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<sup>22</sup> Carter, *The Idea of Decadence*, p.145

<sup>23</sup> K. Swart *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1964) p.139

<sup>24</sup> *Des Causes de la Décadence Française* (Bordeaux et Arcachon, Librairie Moderne, 1871) British Library, French Political Tracts 8051.de. 2

<sup>25</sup> *République ou Décadence?* (Paris, E. Lachaud, 1871) British Library, French Political Tracts 8051.df.50

<sup>26</sup> D. Pick *Faces of Degeneration* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.72

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52

prominence in the world of letters, where it came to have its own distinct characteristics. Here, it seemed, was a domain in which the two aspects of decadence - the negative concern of deterioration and the sense of self-indulgence and extravagance - could attain their full expression. Already in the 1850s, Parnassianism and realism were providing a pessimistic strain, and the Goncourts gave this sentiment a more concrete expression in *Les Hommes de Lettres*, where the hero is informed by his doctor that the real *mal de siècle* is nothing more than the pace of modern life.<sup>29</sup> This question of decadence as integrally, indeed inevitably, linked to modernity was one that was particularly popular, appearing in the works of Taine, Zola, and Gustave le Bon.<sup>30</sup> But an important distinction can be drawn here, as in other domains, between those who scientifically examined degeneration in order to denounce it, and those who, while recognising its dangerous potential, nonetheless derived a perverse pleasure from the portrayal of an unrestrainedly decadent society. Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels, for example, would fit into the first category. In this series, where the author follows the progressive deterioration of a family through the consequences of hereditary disorders, decadence is arguably the principal theme.<sup>31</sup> Zola, however, is always concerned to condemn the decadence that he so carefully dissects, believing with positivistic fervour that a better understanding of social problems and solutions will assuredly arise from a minutely detailed, brutally frank investigation. Such an attitude contrasts strongly with emerging literary trends in the 1880s, trends which sought to reject and undermine the scientism and positivism upon which Zola's naturalist philosophy had been founded. Joris Karl Huysmans – a former disciple of Zola - argued that contemporary literature needed to be redeemed from materialism, and his

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<sup>29</sup> F. W. J. Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1848-1898* (London, Batsford, 1971) p.210

<sup>30</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p.70

<sup>31</sup> Hemmings, *Culture and Society*, p.220

novel *A Rebours* (1884) was a controversial but complete endorsement of his philosophy. Described by Pierre Waldner as «un véritable festival d'excentricités, d'extravagances, de folies inquiétantes»<sup>32</sup> the novel traces the entirely egotistic retreat from modernity and the exploration of the perverse and exotic by the degenerate hero, Des Esseintes. Rather than condemning decadence, Huysmans takes a self-indulgent pleasure in plumbing its very depths, and the novel was extremely influential, seemingly echoing a much more widely experienced, if often latent, sentiment. Léon Bloy and Barbey D'Aurevilly seized upon the novel as reflecting the spiritual anguish of modern times,<sup>33</sup> and its impact was clearly evident in the works of George Moore, Rémy de Gourmont and Oscar Wilde.

The 1880s, indeed, witnessed the emergence of an entire decadent aesthetic, a phenomenon that was closely linked to the Catholic revival, and to the conversion of many influential members of the literary elite.<sup>34</sup> First referred to by Théophile Gautier in his study of Baudelaire's poetry in 1869,<sup>35</sup> the decadent aesthetic was further explored by Paul Bourget in his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (1883) – and Koenraad Swart argues that Bourget thus became the first important theorist of the decadent movement.<sup>36</sup> In his highly influential study of Baudelaire's aesthetic, Bourget argued that decadent societies might be unable to defend themselves with patriotic soldiers and citizens, but they were nonetheless far superior in nurturing art and literature:

«Si les citoyens d'une décadence sont inférieurs comme ouvriers de la grandeur du pays, ne sont-ils pas très supérieurs comme artistes de l'intérieur de leur âme?»<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> J. Huysmans *A Rebours* (ed. P. Waldner) (Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1978) p.11

<sup>33</sup> J. Huysmans *A Rebours* (ed. R. Baldick) (London, Penguin, 1959) Introduction p.15

<sup>34</sup> R. Griffiths *The Reactionary Revolution* (London, Constable, 1966) p.4

<sup>35</sup> P. Charvet *A Literary History of France* (London, Benn, 1967) p.82

<sup>36</sup> Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*, p.162

<sup>37</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.16

Emile Zola and Paul Bourget might appear, then, to represent two entirely opposing tendencies in the literary and political world. Zola, anti-clerical Republican and convinced positivist, sought in his works to dissect and condemn every aspect of the decadent Third Republic. Bourget, best known as a staunchly Catholic and royalist writer with little sympathy for Republican theories, betrayed in his works a distinct fascination with decadence, and posed openly as an apologist for the decadent aesthetic in an article for *Le Siècle Littéraire* in 1876.<sup>38</sup> Zola's novels, and more particularly his newspaper articles in the 1870s and 1880s, called for a reconstructed society along positivistic and scientific lines, in which the experimental method would reveal all truth, and science would be the new religion. Bourget, whose adherence to traditionalist politics became increasingly evident from the 1880s onwards, called for the regeneration of France through a return to a rigidly hierarchical society. And yet despite their contrasting perspectives, both writers shared an ardent sense of the writer's mission and moral responsibility to seek social improvement within a decadent society. Their ideological solutions may have been incompatible, and yet their perceptions of social and political problems often hinted at common concerns and anxieties. Both criticised the type of democracy endorsed by the Third Republic, were suspicious of rising socialist and anarchist tendencies, believed in an almost Darwinian concept of social struggle, and examined the question of heredity as a cause of decadence in an individual and social context. Both also joined in the call for a moral and racial renewal of the nation, even if their proposed ideals were widely divergent. To what extent, then, were they similar in their defiance of a decadent democracy, even if their ideologies were entirely different?

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<sup>38</sup> A. Feuillerat *Paul Bourget: Histoire d'un Esprit sous la Troisième République* (Paris, Plon, 1937) p.54

It is this comparison between the visions of decadence provided by Emile Zola and Paul Bourget that the following thesis will seek to investigate in detail. The period in focus is 1880 to 1900, a time of bitter conflict between the rival Catholic and Republican camps to which the two writers belonged, and during which Zola and Bourget participated in vigorous journalistic campaigns against the perceived failings of the Third Republic. The works to be considered include novels, newspaper articles, critical studies and correspondence dating largely from the 1880s and 1890s, and those of Bourget's later novels that show important developments in ideology. Through such an examination it will be possible not only to investigate the nature and presentation of the idea of decadence, but also to contribute to wider debates on the conflict between Catholic and Republican mentalities, and on the formation of their political ideologies. In particular, it will be possible to explore in some detail the contentious hypothesis of Zeev Sternhell, who has argued that the radical philosophies of both Left and Right in the early twentieth century had their roots in a common dissatisfaction with the early Republic.<sup>39</sup> How deep actually were the divisions between bourgeois observers of such apparently conflicting tendencies? Did class allegiance perhaps play an equally important role in determining fears of decadence and potential social upheaval? How do the proposed solutions of the two writers give an insight into differences between the two factions?

The choice of Zola and Bourget as the foci for this hypothesis is by no means arbitrary: both were authors of considerable contemporary influence, even though their subsequent historiography has been very different. Both were highly complex characters whose positions cannot be fully understood with reference simply to ideological preferences, and in both cases the private persona of an ascetic bourgeois

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<sup>39</sup> Z. Sternhell *Les Origines Françaises du Fascisme 1885-1914* (Paris, Seuil, 1978) p.403



writer was very different from the public figure of powerful propagandist. The influence of each on a specific milieu as well as on society was impressive. Although naturalism in literature became progressively more acceptable, Zola's works nonetheless continued to provoke outrage on both Left and Right, and he enjoyed the doubtful privilege of being the most caricatured personality of the age.<sup>40</sup> Louis Ulbach accused him of writing "putrid literature" and Emile Faguet dismissed him as being «une manière de poète barbare, un Hugo vulgaire et fruste»<sup>41</sup> – for despite his sense of moral purpose, the frankness of his works was almost invariably interpreted as obscenity. His newspaper articles were more deliberately provocative, inspired by the same principle of brutal exposition of the facts to secure social and political improvement. And yet Zola's views were far from being purely idiosyncratic. Rather, Jean-Claude Cassaing and Henri Mitterand have argued that his opinions, especially those expressed during his journalistic *Campagne*, reflected the views of many other critical Republicans:

«Il réflète, aussi bien que des idées avant-garde, les fantasmes, les inquiétudes, voire les régressions de tout un groupe social.»<sup>42</sup>

Bourget may have been less subversive, but he was equally uncompromising in his outlook and criticism, and his position as a theorist was, like Zola's,<sup>43</sup> highly influential in a wider sphere. Not only did he see himself as following in a Counter-Revolutionary tradition stemming from De Bonald and De Maistre,<sup>44</sup> but he was also closely involved with the leading members of the contemporary French Right. His traditionalist theories contributed strongly to the intellectual formation of Charles

<sup>40</sup> D. Baguley (ed.) *Critical Essays on Emile Zola* (Boston, G.K.Hall, 1986) p.2

<sup>41</sup> E. Faguet *Zola* (Paris, Imprimerie A. Eymérout, 1902) p.26

<sup>42</sup> J.-C. Cassaing and H. Mitterand «Zola et la République» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.4

<sup>43</sup> G. Sanvoisin «Essais et notices: le cinquantenaire d'une grande amitié littéraire – rencontre de Bourget et de Barrès, 3 avril 1888» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol. 44 (1938) p.946.

<sup>44</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, Preface p.xi

Maurras and Maurice Barrès: it was in fact Bourget who first launched Barrès on the literary scene, and who persuaded him to enter Parliament in 1906. Nor was Bourget's influence limited to the political Right: he was perceived as such a leading figure in the literary world that the renowned critic Gaston Deschamps commented in *Le Temps* on 26 January 1902 that his work had "bourgetised in all respects...the Republic of Letters".<sup>45</sup> In 1895 he became the youngest writer ever to have been elected to the French Academy<sup>46</sup> (in the same year that Zola's candidacy was in fact rejected) and in 1930 he was awarded the Osiris prize, created for writers whose works were believed to have helped to remedy the problems of the age.<sup>47</sup>

Both Zola and Bourget were thus highly influential writers and thinkers of their age. But what contribution does a comparative study of their works bring to existing research? Firstly, it must be stated that although both writers have received considerable attention from critics over the years, there are nonetheless significant gaps in existing research, and no comparative study has ever been made, beyond the recent publication of three letters by Zola to Bourget in the *Cahiers Naturalistes*.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the two writers have received dramatically different critical treatment over the years. As David Baguley argues,<sup>49</sup> Zola has always been a highly controversial figure: his works provoked heated debate among contemporary critics, and although he received somewhat less attention in the fifty years following his death, research has been unabated in recent years. Since the 1950s, every aspect of his life and career has been subjected to close scrutiny, with a new emphasis on his journalism and literary

<sup>45</sup> C. Garret *Paul Bourget and the Politics of Traditionalism* (Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993) p.3

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4

<sup>47</sup> H. Bordeaux «Le souvenir de Paul Bourget» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol.37 (Jan-Feb 1937) p.594

<sup>48</sup> C. Becker «Zola à Paul Bourget: trois lettres inédites» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.73 (1999) pp.47-49

<sup>49</sup> Baguley, *Critical Essays*, p.1

criticism.<sup>50</sup> His social and political ideas have, however, been the focus of only recent attention, and much research remains to be accomplished in this domain. Frederick Hemmings has considered his role as a social writer, and Brian Nelson the development of his ideology, and his often ambiguous position as satirist of his own class.<sup>51</sup> But until the publication of a collection of essays entitled *Zola et la République* in the *Cahiers Naturalistes* of 1980<sup>52</sup> there had been no systematic study of Zola's Republican ideology and its evolution. The only lengthy investigation of Zola's ideology remains Philip Walker's study of the philosophical and religious thought in *Germinal*,<sup>53</sup> but this is largely abstract in nature, and does not consider the practical application of Zola's thought to social and political decadence. With regard to decadence, the most useful studies have been those on the *Rougon-Macquart* series which demonstrate the unity and cohesion of the theme as well as the continuity of subject matter and approach between this series and later more utopian works.<sup>54</sup>

Paul Bourget, in contrast, has received very little recent critical attention, despite his undisputed importance to contemporaries. During his lifetime the publication of his works invariably provoked responses from major newspapers, and reactions to his plays often made front-page news.<sup>55</sup> A number of articles in praise of his life and work appeared in the 1920s, culminating in a series of tributes after his death in 1935, and such critical responses were largely positive. André Thérive wrote in *Le Temps* that his disappearance from the literary world was «une sorte d'événement historique»<sup>56</sup> and Léon Daudet described him in *Action Française* as being one of the

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<sup>50</sup> Baguley, *Critical Essays*, p.14

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.14

<sup>52</sup> J. -C. Cassaing and H. Mitterand (Eds.) «Zola et la République» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980)

<sup>53</sup> P. Walker "Germinal" and Zola's Philosophical and Religious Thought (Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages Vol.14, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1984)

<sup>54</sup> C. Becker *Germinal: Etudes Littéraires* (Paris, PUF, 1984) p.10

<sup>55</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.33

<sup>56</sup> *Le Temps*, 26 December 1935 (Colindale Library Microfiches M.F. 69)

greatest writers of his age.<sup>57</sup> Even Maurice Martin du Gard, who in his article for *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* dismissed Bourget's ideas as being largely out of date, was nonetheless prepared to admit that he had exerted «une influence considérable» on contemporary society.<sup>58</sup> The biography by his brother-in-law Albert Feuillerat<sup>59</sup> set the pattern for general criticism, and works by Charles Baussan, Ernest Seillière, Henri Bordeaux and a very respectful Maurice Barrès stressed Bourget's importance as thinker and social psychologist. The only main negative criticism was Elsie Pell's *La Sincérité de Paul Bourget* (Paris, 1939) and Jules Sageret's *Les Grands Convertis* (Paris, 1906), the latter of which attributed Bourget's conversion to entirely cynical and worldly motives. Since the 1930s, however, Bourget has been relegated to an almost total obscurity. Certainly, the task of any biographer would have been frustrated by the fact that he left no main deposit of private papers, and stated specifically in his will that none of those papers remaining could be quoted directly.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, his letters and manuscripts were donated to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* only in 1985, and so Crister Garret's thesis, *Paul Bourget and the Politics of Traditionalism*, is the first piece of research to make substantial use of archival evidence. Yet even Garret's analysis leaves many areas unexplored – he focuses almost exclusively on Bourget's novels *L'Etape* and *Le Disciple*, and scarcely mentions Bourget's *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*, equally vital in the formation of his political and social thought.

Comparative research on the two writers is almost non-existent. Felicien Pascal touched on their relationship in his examination of Bourget's position regarding

<sup>57</sup> *Action Française*, 25 December 1935 (Colindale Library Microfiches M.F.4)

<sup>58</sup> *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 28 December 1935 (Colindale Library Microfiches M.F. 215)

<sup>59</sup> A. Feuillerat *Paul Bourget: Histoire d'un Esprit sous la Troisième République* (Paris, Plon, 1937)

<sup>60</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.3

contemporary authors in an article of 1937,<sup>61</sup> a number of articles have indicated the influence of Bourget's *Cosmopolis* on Zola's *Rome*,<sup>62</sup> and three letters between the two writers were published in the *Cahiers Naturalistes* in 1999.<sup>63</sup> Yet the relationship between Zola and Bourget is worthy of far closer study. Despite ideological differences, the two writers in fact formed a strong intellectual friendship, and even when Zola's involvement in the Dreyfus affair put an end to their correspondence, they never spoke critically of one another. «Vous êtes un philosophe et un observateur brûlant de la passion de la vérité» commented Zola to Bourget in 1896 «et c'est sur ce terrain que nous restons frères...»<sup>64</sup>

How could these two writers, so far removed on an ideological plane, find any common ground for understanding? How do their fears, preoccupations and criticisms of the Third Republic provide an insight into the different mentalities of Catholics and Republicans, and does the comparison give any support to Zeldin's hypothesis that the real crisis between Left and Right was one of communication?

In order to examine these questions, the main focus will be on literary, journalistic and critical works of the 1880s and 1890s, with reference to later works where these give an important understanding of ideological progression. Bourget's most influential works in this period include his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (1883) - which have received little attention since the 1930s - and his widely acclaimed *Le Disciple* (1889). Later works, notably *Un Saint* (1896), *L'Étape* (1902), *Un Divorce* (1904) and *Le Démon de Midi* (1914) will also be considered so as to examine the development of his traditionalist theories, together with his controversial play *La*

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<sup>61</sup> F. Pascal «Essais et Notices: Paul Bourget et les écrivains de son temps» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol.39 (May-June 1937) pp.915-925

<sup>62</sup> For example, P. Tortonese «Rome décadente» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.72 (1998) pp.225-237

<sup>63</sup> C. Becker «Zola à Bourget: trois lettres inédites» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.73 (1999) pp.47-49

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49

*Barricade* (1910). Reactions to Bourget's works in contemporary newspapers, including *Le Temps*, *Le Journal des Débats* and *Le Moniteur Universel*, will also be studied. The works by Zola to be considered in detail include the *Rougon-Macquart* novels *La Curée* (1872) and *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893) which give a clear idea of Zola's attitude towards degeneracy and decadence in society, and *Germinal* (1885) which provides a valuable insight into his views on the class struggle. His critical works on naturalism and the Republic: *Lettre à la Jeunesse* (1879), *La République et la Littérature* (1880), and *Le Roman Expérimental* (1880) will be examined in detail, as well as his correspondence from the 1880s relating to the development of his ideology. Attention will be given to as his journalistic attack on Third Republican politics, *Une Campagne* (1880-1881), to his articles on religion in *Une Nouvelle Campagne* (1895-1896), and to his controversial novel, *Rome* (1896).

The strongly literary focus of the study brings inevitable dangers and limitations that must be born in mind. Zola in particular aimed for a high degree of impartiality in his work, and Pierre Cogy has highlighted the danger of identifying his views with those of any one character in a novel.<sup>65</sup> Bourget likewise believed that the author should not impose his views on the reader, but rather seek to demonstrate their validity with a careful, experimental investigation of the various hypotheses. But it is equally pertinent that neither Zola nor Bourget believed in a doctrine of "art for art's sake" – both were writers with a clearly defined sense of mission, and their works were intended to have important social and political significance. Zola may have believed in impartiality, but he also held that a scrupulously detailed examination and exposition of the facts would allow valid conclusions to emerge without explicit authorial comment. Bourget was equally convinced that the observations made in a *roman à*

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<sup>65</sup> P. Cogy «Le discours de Zola sur la Commune: étude d'un problème de réception» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) pp.17-22

*idées* should be self-evident, and intended his *Essais* to represent «quelques notes capables de servir à l'historien de la vie morale pendant la seconde moitié du dix-neuvième siècle français».<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, he believed firmly in the value of studying literary works as historical sources, emphasising the importance of their insight into attitudes and assumptions:

«Les oeuvres de littérature et de l'art sont le plus puissant moyen de transmission de l'héritage psychologique. Il y a donc lieu d'étudier ces oeuvres en tant qu'éducatrices des esprits et des coeurs.»<sup>67</sup>

It is this common understanding of the writer's mission and method which will provide a starting point for the comparative study of the two authors. What exactly did they see as being the role of the writer within a decadent civilisation? What attitudes did they demonstrate towards the writer as moralist, and what methods did they propose for a scientific study of society? In the context of the Third Republic, the criticisms of the two writers were often explicit, as each sought to analyse and denounce the stagnation and mediocrity of the liberal parliamentary regime. But what comparison can be drawn between their condemnation of political decadence, and of the failings of the democratic system? Their proposed political solutions were based on conflicting philosophies, but did their common class allegiance lead to a similar emphasis on the bourgeois *homme supérieur* as a means of political progress and stability? Within a social context, careful consideration will also be given to their attitudes towards the class struggle, and to the controversy surrounding Zola's ambiguous position – which indeed provoked strident criticism from both Left and Right. The image of the worker in their literary works here provides a fruitful field of contrast and comparison. A utopian vision of work and responsibility is certainly one

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<sup>66</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, Avant-propos de 1883, p.xi

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Avant-Propos de 1885, p.xvi

common element in their response to decadence, but equally important is their common emphasis on the family, the context within which the question of hereditary degeneration is most closely examined. The philosophical background to Zola and Bourget's attitudes to decadence, particularly with relation to theories of racial difference and Darwinism, will here receive careful analysis. Finally, the complex and controversial question of religion and renewal will be investigated – an analysis vital to the understanding of the irreconcilable differences between the two writers. What insight does the conflict between Bourget's Catholicism and Zola's anti-clericalism provide in terms of the wider discord between Left and Right? Does such a comparative study demonstrate that the differences between the various factions in Republican society were irreconcilable? Or is there evidence that, despite ideological differences, the bourgeois observers of the Third Republic in fact shared a wide range of common concerns about political, social and moral decadence?



## CHAPTER ONE

### *«La passion de la vérité»<sup>1</sup>: the role of the writer in a decadent society*

«On nous accuse de lever les voiles, mais l'heure n'a-t-elle pas sonné de tout étudier et de tout dire? ... Nous vivons sur les ruines d'un monde. Notre devoir est d'étudier ces ruines, de les étudier avec franchise, sans peur ni mensonge, pour en tirer les éléments du monde futur.»<sup>2</sup>

The question of the writer's role in society was a key element in nineteenth-century literature, and a controversy in which Emile Zola and Paul Bourget were keenly – and sometimes painfully – involved. The furious indignation with which Zola's novels were condemned as obscene and immoral still reverberates in contemporary criticism, and if Bourget was not accused of quite such subversive intentions, he was nonetheless strongly blamed for a reprehensible tendency to revel in decadence rather than suggesting practical solutions. And yet both Zola and Bourget were writers inspired by an almost religious devotion to their moral mission and responsibility, consecrated to their work with every intention of making a sincere and valuable contribution to social improvement. What conception did they share of their role, and how did they contrive to provoke such controversy?

Certainly, it would be impossible to describe their image of the writer's responsibility without according due emphasis to a common sense of combat and conviction. Both writers began to formulate their philosophical conception of their work and mission in the 1870s and 1880s, with a conscious critical distance from the current Republican regime that allowed the establishment of an independent, analytical

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<sup>1</sup> «Vous êtes un philosophe et un observateur brûlant de la passion de la vérité, et c'est sur ce terrain que nous restons frères...» quoted in C. Becker, «Zola à Paul Bourget: trois lettres inédites» in Les Cahiers Naturalistes no.73 (1999) p.49

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by C. Becker, «Républicain sous l'Empire» in Les Cahiers Naturalistes no.54 (1980) p.15

position. Bourget had little sympathy for the Republic: Zola was a fervent republican but wrote in *La République et la Littérature* (1880) that his opinions were not dictated by any allegiance to the government – proclaiming indeed that «je ne tiens par aucun lien au monde politique...je suis seul et libre.»<sup>3</sup> From such a position, both writers saw literature as providing a vital means of moral regeneration in a decadent society, and assumed a moral stance so bellicose that it was almost destined to provoke adverse reaction. Although their styles of writing were very different, Zola and Bourget shared an urgent sense of a quest for truth, a desire for social usefulness, and an unashamed frankness in confronting social problems that was undeniably combative in character. Their use of the consciously scientific and empirical method that formed the strongest bond between them was also a challenge to existing methods of analysis, reinforced by the rigour with which it was employed.

The shared sense of method and mission that characterises the works of Zola and Bourget might seem at first glance to be surprising, given that they emerged from two apparently conflicting literary backgrounds and approaches. Whereas Zola sought to dissect society with medical impartiality and precision, Bourget was far more closely identified with the strain in literature that tended to display a certain affinity with the decadence it described. Particularly in his earlier works, his reflection of the style of Huysmans, whose *A Rebours* has been described as “nothing less than the novel’s love affair with degeneration”<sup>4</sup> led to the criticism that he was encouraging rather than condemning the crisis in society. Furthermore, Ernest Seillière wrote in 1937 that Bourget’s work had provoked particular controversy of late for the mere fact

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<sup>3</sup> E. Zola *La République et la Littérature* in *Le Roman Expérimental* (Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1971) p.341

<sup>4</sup> D. Pick *Faces of Degeneration* (Cambridge, CUP, 1989) p.72

of its allegation of French decadence; seen to be dangerously demoralising<sup>5</sup> – although this undoubtedly says more about the insecurity of the late 1930s than it does about Paul Bourget. On a deeper level, however, Zola and Bourget seem to have far more in common in their approach to decadence than initial categorisations might lead one to believe. Zola's claim to distant impartiality is not without its critics – Frederick Hemmings has accused him of taking far too morbid an interest in the decline of his *Rougon-Macquart* family<sup>6</sup> – and Bourget, in spite of a half-confessed fascination with decadence, in no way intended to propagate it by his works. Furthermore, whatever the ambiguous nature of their personal attitudes towards decadence, their concept of the role of the writer was unequivocal.

First and foremost, Zola and Bourget shared an ardent desire for the reconstruction of French identity, national pride and sense of purpose in the years following 1870. Bourget emphasised the spiritual nature of this renewal in *L'Esprit qui Nie*, an article written for *La Renaissance* in 1873, and shared the romantic idealism and faith of such writers as Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier and Alfred de Vigny.<sup>7</sup> Zola, in contrast, became increasingly convinced that regeneration should take a more scientific form, even claiming that «c'est en appliquant la formule scientifique que (la jeunesse française) reprendra l'Alsace et la Lorraine»<sup>8</sup>. But both were equally convinced of the necessity for literature to provide a sense of direction and guide for the current generation. Essentially, therefore, they portray the literary works of France as a reflection of past achievement and as a rich resource for the younger generation to turn to in the formulation of beliefs and values. Bourget's *Essais de Psychologie*

<sup>5</sup> E. Seillière *Paul Bourget, Psychologue et Sociologue* (Paris, Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1937) p.8

<sup>6</sup> F. W. J. Hemmings *Culture and Society in France 1848-1898* (London, Batsford, 1971) p.220

<sup>7</sup> C. Garret *Paul Bourget and the Politics of Traditionalism* (Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993) p.108

<sup>8</sup> Zola, *Lettre à la Jeunesse* in *Le Roman Expérimental*, p.135

*Contemporaine* testify strongly to his belief that «la littérature est une psychologie vivante»<sup>9</sup> - that just as literary works provide the clearest indication of the values, assumptions and mentalities of an entire epoch, so also do they reflect «le génie de (la) race».<sup>10</sup> As such, great literary works should be respected for their moral value, and thus Bourget claimed in his introduction to *Le Disciple* that «l'ami qui t'écrit ces lignes possède, à défaut d'autre mérite, celui de croire profondément au sérieux de son art.»<sup>11</sup> This introduction, which urged young readers aged between eighteen and twenty five to renew the wounded soul of France and to restore national energy with their own reserves of *amour* and *volonté*, had such an impact on contemporary thought that it received attention and appreciation from several major newspapers.<sup>12</sup> *Le Moniteur Universel* commented in particular on the important questions raised with regard to the responsibility of artists, scientists and writers by challenging the prevalent notion of art for art's sake.<sup>13</sup> But Bourget was far from being alone in bringing such questions of moral responsibility to general attention. Zola was likewise convinced that in such an era of transition and uncertainty the role of literature was paramount, and his preoccupation with the function of art in this context is evident even from his correspondence of the 1860s.<sup>14</sup> He was especially concerned at the degree of censorship imposed on literary works by the politicians of the Third Republic, and demanded greater freedom for the writer, claiming that «les gouvernements suspectent la littérature parce qu'elle est une force qui leur échappe».<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note

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<sup>9</sup> P. Bourget *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Plon, 1899) Préface de 1899, p.x

<sup>10</sup> P. Bourget *Le Disciple* (Edition définitive, Paris, Plon, 1901) Introduction, p.iv

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Introduction, p.i

<sup>12</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.33

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.34

<sup>14</sup> H. Suwala «Fonction de la littérature et mission de l'écrivain selon Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.73 (1980) p.33

<sup>15</sup> Zola, *La République et la Littérature*, p.357

that Edouard Rod, Maurice Barrès, Henri Bergson and Ernest Renan also published works in the 1880s dealing with similar concerns.<sup>16</sup>

If Zola and Bourget were concerned about the general role of literature as a means of moral regeneration, they were still more preoccupied with the urgency of their responsibility as individual writers. Indeed, in both cases their conviction provoked intense controversy, not only over the validity of their moral purpose, but also over the degree of evolution evident in their works. What exactly did the critics so violently object to, and are their criticisms justified? How close a comparison can in fact be drawn between the moral purposes of Zola and Bourget?

The debate over the immorality of Zola's works is notorious, and current opinion is still divided over the nature of his moral standpoint.<sup>17</sup> Some of his contemporaries accused him of writing obscene novels for easy profit, others of writing worthy novels to obtain official approval.<sup>18</sup> David Baguley highlights the persuasive argument that his works were of particular concern to ruling "rightist" critics because they fuelled reactionary fears, and undermined bourgeois myths based on the repression of the body and of the subversive lower classes.<sup>19</sup> Allegations of immorality were strongest of all in England, where, as Enid Starkie has pointed out, French literature was often referred to as being "leprous" - a dangerous, corrupting influence on the younger generation.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, contemporaries found it hard to accept that the frank, even repellent representation of reality that Zola offered his readers could in any way be justified as having a moral purpose. Leftist critics were, moreover, outraged by Zola's depiction of the working classes in *Germinal*, and Henri

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<sup>16</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.38

<sup>17</sup> C. Becker *Germinal: Etudes Littéraires* (Paris, PUF, 1984) p.5

<sup>18</sup> D. Baguley (ed.) *Critical Essays on Emile Zola* (Boston, G.K.Hall, 1986) p.4

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9

Duhamel accused Zola with indignation of having «traité les mineurs comme un ramassis d'ivrognes et de débauchés».<sup>21</sup>

Yet were the critics in fact misunderstanding Zola's fundamental purpose and ideology? Surely Zola, who held such a high concept of the importance of literature in moral renewal, did not intend his novels to encourage the immorality that they were accused of representing? On the contrary, his literary and more particularly his critical works stress the daunting nature of his responsibility, proclaiming in no uncertain terms «la haute et sévère morale du roman naturaliste contemporain, qu'on a l'imbécilité d'accuser d'ordure et de dépravité».<sup>22</sup> The journalistic dismissal of his works as obscene is, as he sees it, a deliberate misrepresentation of naturalist literature for the sake of prurient popular interest, and a misunderstanding of his absolute commitment to an objective – if abhorrent – truth. Particularly in the case of *Germinal*, where the conditions of the mining community are described in a minute detail based on close observation, Zola intends to highlight aspects of society which most of the bourgeoisie seem either deliberately or unconsciously to ignore. Claiming in his *Roman Expérimental* that «les seules oeuvres grandes et morales sont les oeuvres de vérité»<sup>23</sup> he thus conceives of his frank descriptions as a means towards a very practical morality. By seeking to examine and portray *la vérité*, the writer would be contributing towards a gradual but perceptible increase in the understanding of the laws governing both the individual and society. Politicians would then in theory be able to employ the results of such literary experiments in the formulation of their policies:

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Becker, *Germinal*, p.5

<sup>22</sup> Zola, *Lettre à la Jeunesse*, p.121

<sup>23</sup> Zola, *Le Roman Expérimental*, p.85

«Quand on possédera les lois, il n'y aura plus qu'à agir sur les individus et sur les milieux, si l'on veut arriver au meilleur état social.»<sup>24</sup>

More effective than any palliative charitable work, such an achievement would allow the eventual understanding and consequent mastery of good and evil,<sup>25</sup> and it is with this aim of ultimate truth and knowledge in mind that the writer should be encouraged to exercise his mission in every social domain.

Somewhat ironically, Zola then proceeds to condemn the vain efforts of idealistic writers who base their social theories on abstract principles and objectives, «des écrivains idéalistes qui s'appuient sur l'irrationnel et le surnaturel.»<sup>26</sup> But there is a constant tension in much of his critical work between a complete denial of the metaphysical, and a longing for progress through science towards some slightly abstract form of perfect understanding. His attitude towards philosophy is consequently ambiguous, and in his *Lettre à la Jeunesse* he admits the usefulness of philosophers only in so far as their intriguing, if undoubtedly false, theories encourage writers and scientists to make further discoveries.<sup>27</sup> Overall, as Halina Suwala argues, he demonstrates a complex attitude towards idealism, and a more consistent one as regards the role of the writer.<sup>28</sup> Initially inspired by his heroes Hugo and Michelet to consider the writer as a «poète-mage»<sup>29</sup> with a mission to console and redeem humanity, he gradually altered his perspective through his contact with positivist thought. From the mid-1860s onwards, his image of the writer began to evolve into that of a patient and scientific worker, a «chroniqueur-moraliste»<sup>30</sup> whose use of the

<sup>24</sup> Zola, *Le Roman Expérimental*, p.76

<sup>25</sup> Zola, *Lettre à la Jeunesse*, p.121

<sup>26</sup> Zola, *Le Roman Expérimental*, p.80

<sup>27</sup> Zola, *Lettre à la Jeunesse*, p.134

<sup>28</sup> Suwala «Fonction de la littérature» p.32

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.33

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.35

experimental method would bring self-evident conclusions. Only in his later works did he come to reconcile this method with his visions of utopian society, but his notion of his mission remained constant, and «le Zola de la vérité en marche tend la main au jeune idéaliste de 1860.»<sup>31</sup> Fundamentally, then, his doctrine rests on the belief that the moral duty of the writer is to force back the boundaries of the unknown through an honest portrayal of reality destined to raise awareness of social problems and solutions.

How can this be compared with Paul Bourget's moral perspective? Certainly Bourget was not subjected to the same allegations of obscenity, but the morality of his works was nonetheless controversial – even though he himself was as convinced as Zola of his responsibility regarding social questions. As his biographer Albert Feuillerat makes clear, Bourget's moral position was a complex one. Maurice Barrès may have described him as a man «qui aboutit à des conclusions auprès desquelles l'orthodoxie des gens d'Eglise semble bien frivole»<sup>32</sup> but Bourget was by no means a single minded fanatic, rigidly defending a doctrine which he had never had cause to doubt. Rather he was a man of his time, deeply marked by his own experience of bohemian life,<sup>33</sup> and with a lingering attachment to the decadence that he depicts. His *Essais* reveal this ambiguity only too clearly – not only does he admit «qu'il est des vertus inesthétiques et de splendides corruptions...»<sup>34</sup> but he retains sufficient memory of his earlier agnosticism to argue the attraction of Buddhism, and to reflect on the «théologie d'un naturalisme heureux»<sup>35</sup> of the Ancient Greeks. It is thus possible to understand why Bourget was criticised by contemporaries for using his *Essais* to pose moral problems without suggesting practical solutions.

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<sup>31</sup> Suwala «Fonction de la littérature» p.40

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Barrès, introduction to R. Rivasso *L'Unité d'une Pensée – Essai sur l'Oeuvre de Paul Bourget* (Paris, Plon, 1914) p.iv

<sup>33</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.107

<sup>34</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.277

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.345



Later critics have sought rather to debate the nature of his moral evolution – for although the general consensus has been that his thought reflects an overall unity,<sup>36</sup> André Guyaux had more recently argued for a dramatic change in moral perspective, and a gradual desertion of decadence.<sup>37</sup> In fact both arguments have a certain validity, for while Bourget's later works are more prescriptive in tone, and seek to provide more clearly defined solutions to the problems examined, his concept of his role as a moralist can be traced back even to his earliest writings. His 1883 Preface to his *Essais* describes his work as being «quelques notes capables de servir à l'historien de la vie morale pendant la seconde moitié du dix-neuvième siècle français.»<sup>38</sup> In 1885 he responded to allegations that his *Essais* failed to provide moral guidelines with the assertion that the mere attempt to examine the symptoms of France's illness was in itself «un acte de foi».<sup>39</sup> Albert Reggio has further argued that these *Essais*, the first of Bourget's works to secure him a literary reputation, already demonstrate considerable maturity of thought.<sup>40</sup> Bourget himself clearly conceived of them as setting the pattern for his life's work - «la longue enquête sur les maladies morales de la France actuelle» as he described it in 1899.<sup>41</sup> They seemed to form a logical step in the evolution of his social and political philosophies, and he stressed their importance as a modest contribution within the wider context of social criticism and reformation characterised by the works of Taine and Balzac.<sup>42</sup>

Certainly it would be impossible to deny the seriousness with which Bourget viewed the moral usefulness of his novels. Like Zola, he considered the moral purpose

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<sup>36</sup> D. Pernot «Paul Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*» in *La Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* Vol.95 (1995) Issue I, p.116

<sup>37</sup> André Guyaux in P. Bourget *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Gallimard, 1993) Preface, p.ix

<sup>38</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, Avant-Propos de 1883, p.xii

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Avant-Propos de 1885, p.xviii

<sup>40</sup> A. Reggio *Au Seuil de leur Âme* (Paris, 1904) p.8

<sup>41</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, Préface de 1899, p.xi

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.xi

of his writing to transcend even its literary value: as he commented in a letter shortly after the publication of *Le Disciple*: «littérairement, l'ouvrage vaut ce qu'il vaut: moralement, je suis sûr de sa valeur et qu'il sera sain à quelques-uns.»<sup>43</sup> This duty imposed a necessity for absolute honesty and sincerity when presenting a morally instructive vision of the world, and in the introduction to the work itself he commented pedagogically that:

«il n'est pas d'honnête homme de lettres, si chétif soit-il, qui ne doive trembler de responsabilité...»<sup>44</sup>

That Zola and Bourget were in fundamental agreement on the writer's duty to seek *la vérité* with a view to moral improvement is more than evident from their correspondence. Bourget may not have been a convinced partisan of naturalism, but he wrote with reference to Zola that «M. Zola est souvent brutal, souvent injuste, mais il est sincère et vigoureux, et c'est un des grands artistes de l'époque».<sup>45</sup> Zola, writing to Bourget on the subject of Balzac in December 1876, celebrated their common devotion to the literary and moral cause, and urged Bourget to undertake a journalistic campaign of criticism, adding emphatically that «personne ne voit la vérité ou personne n'ose la dire.»<sup>46</sup>

Nor was their common moral stance their only point of contact, for the parallel can be extended to include their concept of and respect for a scientific method of investigation, where the consensus between the two writers is particularly striking.

Zola's doctrines evolved within a framework of positivism: the belief that science is the basis for all knowledge of reality, which must therefore correspond to

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<sup>43</sup> P. Bourget, quoted in Seillière, *Paul Bourget, Psychologue et Sociologue*, p.22

<sup>44</sup> Bourget, *Le Disciple*, Introduction, p.i

<sup>45</sup> P. Bourget, quoted in F. Pascal, «Essais et Notices: Paul Bourget et les écrivains de son temps» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol.39 (May-June 1937) p.919

<sup>46</sup> E. Zola, quoted in Becker «Zola à Bourget: trois lettres inédites» p.47

what can be observed, or else logically deduced from observation.<sup>47</sup> Zola's own positivism is exemplified in his critical work *Le Roman Expérimental* (1880) where he is evidently torn between the philosophical positivism of Claude Bernard – whose theories he quotes verbatim at considerable length – and the scientism of Taine and Renan, who proposed science as a path to metaphysical knowledge.<sup>48</sup> If his metaphysical position is ambiguous, his practical concern is nonetheless clear: literary works should be based on the collection of facts, the formulation of hypotheses, and the drawing of logical – if not self-evident – conclusions. Following Claude Bernard's determinist stance and reductionist philosophy, Zola argues in *Le Roman Expérimental* that living creatures should be subjected to exactly the same method of study as chemical substances:

«On peut annoncer, sans crainte de se tromper, l'heure où les lois de la pensée et des passions seront formulées à leur tour. Un même déterminisme doit régir la pierre des chemins et le cerveau de l'homme.»<sup>49</sup>

The role of the writer is thus not limited to observation – and Zola strongly criticises those who dismiss naturalists as aiming solely for “realism”<sup>50</sup> – but rather includes a strong experimental element. Although the subjective aspect should be limited to a minimum, absolute impartiality would be inconclusive, and it is the writer's duty to employ his own understanding so as to draw conclusions from his experiments – within the bounds of reason:

«Nous devons modifier la nature, sans sortir de la nature.»<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> P. Walker “*Germinal*” and Zola's *Philosophical and Religious Thought* (Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages no.14 Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1984) p.99

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.99

<sup>49</sup> Zola, *Le Roman Expérimental*, p.79

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.65

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.66

Although Zola admits that the certainties obtained by this method are not entirely comparable to those in the physical sciences, he emphasises that the experimental method is as yet in its infancy, and that the gradual but inevitable perfection of the method will bring greater exactness and impartiality. Zola's faith in this ultimate triumph seems unbounded: once all factors governing individual behaviour have been ascertained, social interaction will be subjected to the same analysis, and the scientific method extended successfully into all domains.<sup>52</sup> The possibility that individual and social behaviour might not be so conveniently separate seems not to concern him, and he fervently acclaims the triumphant progress of science, condemning all misguided idealists who stand in its path.

Paul Bourget is less unconditional in his praise of science, but nevertheless shows a remarkably similar understanding and acceptance of the experimental method as a means of investigation. Bourget was the only main creative writer of the Catholic Revival who did not entirely reject rationalism<sup>53</sup> – on the contrary, he seized upon the empirical method as a means of undermining the self-proclaimed rationalism of democratic society, thus “proving” the logic and suitability of his traditionalist alternative. Like Zola, he was considerably influenced by Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'Etude de la Médecine Expérimentale* (1865) – and Dr Grasset has argued that his novels demonstrate clear medical analogies, as well as a precise and biological conception of construction and purpose.<sup>54</sup> Although Bourget actually condemns positivist doctrine in *Le Disciple*, his own concept of a knowable reality based on facts and advanced by hypotheses is not exactly dissimilar: indeed, he proclaimed in his *Essais* that:

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<sup>52</sup> Zola, *Le Roman Expérimental*, p.72

<sup>53</sup> R. Griffiths *The Reactionary Revolution* (London, Constable, 1966) p.6

<sup>54</sup> J. Grasset *L'Idée Médicale dans les Romans de Paul Bourget* (Montpellier, 1904) p.19

«Si derrière la Science il y a méthode, derrière la méthode il y a quelque chose encore. Ce quelque chose, qui constitue l'essence même de la recherche expérimentale, c'est le fait.»<sup>55</sup>

Despite being criticised for using the novel as a form of making prescriptive comment,<sup>56</sup> Bourget himself saw the literary device as an excellent framework within which to analyse contemporary society. Like Zola, he claimed that «la méthode commande le degré de la certitude»<sup>57</sup> - for only with hypotheses could the writer provide structure and focus to an otherwise confused and disconcerting succession of facts and sensations. The duty of the writer would admit of no less, and as he argued in his introduction to *Le Démon de Midi*:

«Notre observation à nous ne consiste pas uniquement à noter les faits. Nous en induisons les conséquences, et nous poussons sans cesse, dans nos hypothèses, jusqu'au terme de leur logique...»<sup>58</sup>

Bourget thus agrees with Zola's principle that pure and impartial observation is a mere fallacy; that the writer has a moral duty to conclude from his experiments – provided that his proposed conclusions seem justified by his results. Ultimately, such an experimental method will lead to the discovery of the “laws” governing society – and Gaëton Bernoville has argued one of the most frequently recurring themes in Bourget's works is the inevitable revenge that follows a transgression of such perceived natural rules.<sup>59</sup> The experimental method may not be without its dangers, but it is nonetheless vital in this social context in dispelling fallible concepts and romantic ideals. Ironically, however, Bourget employs the scientific method to demonstrate that

<sup>55</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.169

<sup>56</sup> For example by Reggio in *Au Seuil de leur Ame*, pp.12-15

<sup>57</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.58

<sup>58</sup> P. Bourget *Le Démon de Midi* (Paris, Plon, 1914) Preface, p.iv

<sup>59</sup> G. Bernoville *Célébrités d'Hier et d'Aujourd'hui – Paul Bourget* (Paris, Denoëlle et Steele, 1936) p.23

it is the hierarchical Catholic society, rather than the democratic Republican one, that actually conforms to reason and experience. Like Zola, he condemns idealists, but the idealists whom he so powerfully reproaches are ardent and revolutionary Republicans - such as Joseph Monneron in *L'Etape*.<sup>60</sup> Such Republicans base their principles on dangerously abstract philosophies, on fundamentally unsound theories of the innate goodness of human nature, irreconcilable with a positivistic, empirical attitude. Any contemporary should be able to recognise the failure of the democratic system, and to acknowledge in consequence that only a traditionalist society can correspond with the accumulated wisdom of centuries of experience.

Despite fundamental differences of opinion, Zola and Bourget seem thus to demonstrate a remarkable degree of consensus with regard to the writer's mission and method within the context of a decadent society. Both suffered harsh criticism on moral grounds, and yet their critics seem in many cases to have misunderstood their heightened sense of moral purpose and responsibility in the literary domain. Both shared an ardent concern to represent reality in as sincere a manner as possible; Zola's apparent obscenity being in clear accordance with a naturalist doctrine aiming to raise awareness of social problems in the interest of future improvement. Zola and Bourget likewise held largely similar beliefs with regard to the experimental method to be employed in literature as a means of creating and testing hypotheses. Zola's stance, especially in his critical works, was more deliberately provocative, but both writers demonstrated a sense of urgent and uncompromising conviction to confront social reality that was destined to inspire powerful reaction and heated controversy.

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<sup>60</sup> J. de Bonne *La Pensée de Paul Bourget* (Paris, Editions Sociales et Politiques IX, 1937) p.22

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Utopian solutions to democratic disorders: two critical reactions to the early Third Republic*

In the year 1881, both Emile Zola and Paul Bourget were involved in energetic Press campaigns against the political inadequacy of the Third Republic. A curious coincidence – or is it? Certainly, both writers were by this stage accustomed to using the Press as a means of disseminating their forceful and often uncompromising opinions, but their campaigns of the early 1880s were not only intense, but also intensely similar. Inspired by their common determination to confront social and political decadence, they both chose journalism to express in a direct and polemical form their fears of democratic disorder, political stagnation and mediocrity. And these responses to the Third Republic do more than demonstrate the individual evolution of two writers with a shared sense of political engagement: they also illuminate a far wider context of political reaction. The comparison between Zola and Bourget allows an invaluable insight into the overall conflict between Left and Right, bringing to light the common fears and disillusionment which crossed political and religious boundaries, and highlighting the very different solutions proposed. It could be argued, indeed, that the juxtaposition of these two reactions also gives a clearer understanding of how the liberal parliamentary government of the 1880s led to an increasingly polarised society, with Right wing nationalism on the one side, socialism and anarchism on the other.

But why was it that in the early 1880s both Bourget and Zola felt such an urgent need to criticise the political life of the nation on both ideological and practical accounts? To what extent were their reactions dictated by the particular political

situation, or inspired by their own concerns? How in fact do their journalistic campaigns fit in with their overall political evolution? Considering their various criticisms in more detail, it is possible to draw a close comparison between their respective perceptions of political life and doctrine – but how far is this representative of the wider context? To what degree can Zola's and Bourget's reactions - and indeed solutions – to the disorders of the Third Republic be seen as a microcosm of the greater conflict between Left and Right?

The Third Republic was from its very conception a somewhat paradoxical regime and by the early 1880s was beginning to cause frustration among a number of political observers. Firstly, its character was too uncertain; secondly, it had evolved to become a system of parliamentary government that seemed to many politicians and critics to be as unexpected as it was ineffective.

The uncertainty of the regime was evident from the beginning - and is perhaps unsurprising, given that Republic was created by an assembly that was not only conservative but also largely monarchist in nature. Unlike any previous constitution, the Constitution of 1875 stated that revision of the regime was to be relatively straightforward,<sup>1</sup> and only in 1884 was it decided that «la forme républicaine du gouvernement ne pouvait faire l'objet d'une proposition de révision.»<sup>2</sup> Likewise, although the Assembly was obliged in 1870-71 to present a united front in order to deal with a period of national crisis, it was in reality far from monolithic, with deep-rooted and complex divisions between Republicans, monarchists and Bonapartists. While the Republican evolution of the regime became gradually more pronounced – its popular acceptance demonstrated by election results – the initial caution and

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<sup>1</sup> Article 8 of the «Loi du 25 février 1875 relative à l'organisation des pouvoirs publics» made revision possible on the demand of the majority of either chamber. (J. Godechot *Les Constitutions de la France depuis 1789*, Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1995 p.332)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.329



conservatism had left an indelible impression. Furthermore, popular Republicanism was not necessarily reflected in parliamentary measures, and the Government of Moral Order, particularly under the Duc de Broglie, tended rather to arouse fears of a new police state, with rigid censorship of the Press and strict social control.<sup>3</sup>

More paradoxical still, however, was the manner in which the Third Republic evolved to become a system of parliamentary sovereignty that was not only unexpected, but also in conflict with the beliefs of most of the political parties involved. The parliamentary character of the regime was by no means inevitable, and as David Thomson argues, the regime could have developed to become either a British system of cabinet government, or else an American model of presidential rule.<sup>4</sup> But as the Republic evolved, executive power became increasingly focused on the Assembly, so much so that the role of the President grew progressively more superfluous. The Rivet Law, for example, was initially introduced under Thiers to define the role of the President, but was altered by the *Loi des Trente* of March 1873 - and later by the Constitution of 1875 - to allow considerably greater power to the Assembly.<sup>5</sup> By enforcing a distinct separation between the Assembly and the President – who could only communicate with Parliament by means of his ministers, and who was not permitted to participate directly in their debates<sup>6</sup> – this constitution effectively accorded to Parliament both legislative and executive power. The characters of the Presidents themselves further reinforced this development – Marshal MacMahon, who succeeded Thiers, was a veteran professional soldier rather than an experienced politician, and his lack of political expertise led to considerable limitation of the

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<sup>3</sup> David Thomson, *Democracy in France since 1870* (Oxford University Press, 1969) p.88

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.75

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84

<sup>6</sup> Article 6, «Loi constitutionnelle du 16 juillet 1875 sur les rapports des pouvoirs publics» (*Les Constitutions de la France*, p.334)

President's role. MacMahon's dissolution of Parliament on 16 May 1877 was the last occasion on which a President made use of this constitutional power.

It is important to emphasise that neither the political impotence of the President, nor yet the excessive powers of Parliament corresponded to the intentions of those involved in the foundation or running of the regime.<sup>7</sup> But by the early 1880s these unwanted developments were not only firmly integrated in political life; they had also been exacerbated by the divisions and tensions evident in the Third Republic from the beginning. For the life of the French Parliament was not dictated by any straightforward conflict between clearly defined parties. On the contrary, the multiplicity of small groups meant that every cabinet relied on a coalition, the consequence being disproportionate power for centre groups - the basis for all governments - and for the more marginal groups whose support could prove definitive. Political progress in any direction was thus frustrated, and governments frequently collapsed,<sup>8</sup> leading to the incessant reorganisation of political groupings. By the early 1880s, then, the Republic had been established - at least in principle - for over a decade, but such evolution as took place was so slow moving as to be equally disappointing to all concerned. The regime was thus indeterminate in both character and action, and the only certainty seemed to be that of constant compromise.

Although the majority of the French public most probably regarded such political stagnation with weary indifference,<sup>9</sup> the more passionate political observer could be moved to consider the whole spectacle as almost inexpressibly frustrating. Almost inexpressibly - but not quite - for in the case of some observers, the power of

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<sup>7</sup> Thomson, *Democracy in France*, p.90

<sup>8</sup> There were in fact 60 different governments in France between 1870 and 1914 (R. Anderson, *France 1870-1914*, London, Routledge, 1984 p.5)

<sup>9</sup> Guy Chapman emphasises the mass indifference towards elections - and indeed towards politics in general - in *The Third Republic in France - The First Phase 1871-1884* (London, Macmillan, 1962 ) p.217

written expression was the most effective and necessary means of raising public awareness of the deficiencies of the Third Republic. Max Beloff has commented in *The Intellectual in Politics* that the intellectual observer often regards it as his duty to pursue and proclaim truth by all legitimate means, and without respect for the governing conventions.<sup>10</sup> David Schalk, quoting Thomas Mann, expands this observation with reference to “the sensitive function of the literary man to discern and to define the will of his times.”<sup>11</sup> And both Emile Zola and Paul Bourget were very much attuned to such concerns, their political writings of the early 1880s demonstrating their determination not to remain silent in the face of political stagnation. How in fact did they perceive their political missions, and what circumstances surrounded their journalistic campaigns?

Certainly, the political involvement of Zola and Bourget has given rise to considerable debate. Their position as artists and intellectuals in politics must be clearly understood before their involvement can be adequately analysed, and in both cases the evolution of their attitudes and opinions is complex, best placed in relation to their sense of the writer’s duty to proclaim truth.

Paul Bourget’s attitude towards political involvement evolves directly from this basic principle. Believing firmly that «toute oeuvre d’art est action»<sup>12</sup> he remained convinced throughout his life of the importance of using literary, critical and journalistic works to analyse contemporary social and political problems. His actual focus evolved over the years, although his sense of engagement remained constant: initially criticised for writing frivolous novels about the amorous intrigues of the upper classes, he broadened his field of study in the 1870s to include newspaper articles in *Le*

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<sup>10</sup> M. Beloff *The Intellectual in Politics and Other Essays* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970) p.17

<sup>11</sup> D. Schalk «Zola et l’histoire: l’historien et Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.67 (1993) p.49

<sup>12</sup> P. Bourget, quoted in *Le Temps*, 26 December 1935 (Colindale Library Microfiches M.F.69)

*Parlement* on democracy, labour, education and other pertinent issues. His *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* - originally published in *La Nouvelle Revue* between 15 December 1881 and 1 October 1885<sup>13</sup> – were acclaimed as a masterly analysis of contemporary society, and from this point onwards Bourget used his novels to make increasingly strong criticisms of the Third Republic as a whole. In his later years he also directed his attention towards the theatre as a means of publicising political problems, and *La Barricade*, *L'Emigré* and *Le Tribun* were extremely controversial, eliciting strident appreciation and condemnation from the Press. Henri Bordeaux recalls how, even during his final illness, Bourget continued to keep himself informed of political developments,<sup>14</sup> and André Thérive commented in his obituary of Bourget that «il aura écrit quelques-unes des études de psychologie et de politique les plus solides qu'ait produites son époque».<sup>15</sup>

But if Bourget was convinced of the benefits of political action through novels and the Press, he was considerably less drawn to the idea of direct intervention in the political sphere. Crister Garret has commented on how Paul Bourget's friends and contemporaries Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès have received keen attention from critics, whereas Bourget himself has fallen into relative obscurity, and attributes this phenomenon to his failure to involve himself directly in political life.<sup>16</sup> Certainly Bourget's respect for universal suffrage seems to have been short-lived. Although initially prepared to accept it as a valid means of political representation, the first two decades of the Third Republic appear to have been sufficient to convince him of its

<sup>13</sup> P. Bourget *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* – Edition établie et préfacée par André Guyaux (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1993) p.xii

<sup>14</sup> H. Bordeaux «Le souvenir de Paul Bourget» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol.37 (Jan-Feb 1937) p.593

<sup>15</sup> *Le Temps*, 26 December 1935 (Colindale Library Microfiches M.F.69)

<sup>16</sup> C. Garret *Paul Bourget and the Politics of Traditionalism* (University of California, Los Angeles, 1993) p.6

inefficacy, and his disillusionment was complete by the time he wrote *Le Disciple* in 1889.<sup>17</sup> Henri Bordeaux recalls a conversation with Bourget in which the latter proclaimed with pride that he had never voted, despite Bordeaux' assurance that it was his social duty to do so.<sup>18</sup> This was not to say that he disapproved on principle of direct intervention in political matters; merely that he felt that it was not his calling. As he commented to Maurice Barrès in 1906:

«Si je pouvais supporter les injures, les désagréments, si mes nerfs me le permettraient, j'accepterais.»<sup>19</sup>

Such scruples would certainly not have troubled Emile Zola, renowned for his combative political role, and who announced in the preface to *Une Campagne* that «on vit au moins, lorsqu'on se bat.»<sup>20</sup> Sharing Bourget's sense of intellectual engagement, he had fewer qualms about adopting more direct forms of intervention, and his attitude towards politics in general is altogether more complex, and needs to be understood in the light of the various hypotheses to which it has given rise. First of all, it must be emphasised that there is a remarkable lack of consensus regarding Zola's political involvement. Armand Roth, for example, asks how it is possible logically to interpret Zola's tactics in the early Third Republic, when he seems first in favour of Thiers, then convinced by the moderate republicans, and finally sides with the extreme left.<sup>21</sup> Joseph Sungolowsky, comparing Zola's *Germinal* with Flaubert's *Education Sentimentale*, attempts the unwise generalisation that Zola found politics almost

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<sup>17</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.15

<sup>18</sup> Bordeaux, «Le souvenir de Paul Bourget» p.600

<sup>19</sup> G. Sanvoisin «Essais et Notices: le cinquantenaire d'une grande amitié littéraire – rencontre de Bourget et de Barrès, 3 avril 1888» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol.44 (March – April 1938) p.947

<sup>20</sup> E. Zola *Une Campagne* in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1969) Vol.14, Introduction, p.423

<sup>21</sup> Armand Roth, quoted in H. Weinberg «Ironie et idéologie: Zola à la naissance de la Troisième République» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.42 (numéro spécial) 1971, p.73

universally futile,<sup>22</sup> a generalisation which hardly holds true when Zola's other works are taken into account. Henry Weinberg has attempted to make sense of Zola's contradictory behaviour by describing him as essentially rational, but occasionally moved by emotion to act out of character.<sup>23</sup> And Daniel Delas, after a perceptive analysis of his political involvement in the years 1871-1881, refuses to commit himself to any one interpretation, leaving the debate open with the admission that:

«il y a dans sa pensée un chevauchement perpétuel du rationnel et de l'irrationnel qui mériterait une étude plus approfondie.»<sup>24</sup>

There is no doubt, then, that Zola's seemingly irrational and contradictory political behaviour has left critics alternately bemused and frustrated. But is there really no logic underlying his evolving attitude towards political life?

While it is impossible – and would be unrealistic - to deny a certain degree of inconsistency in Zola's attitude to politics, there are nevertheless some broad hypotheses that render his behaviour more easily intelligible. Fundamentally, as has already been emphasised, Zola's duty was first of all to himself and to his mission as a writer - not to the political world - and the literary aspect of his works is always of paramount importance. As François Mitterrand comments:

«la grandeur de Zola tient au fait que son oeuvre littéraire est une oeuvre politique, même quand il ne l'a pas voulu, et que son oeuvre politique est toujours restée littéraire...»<sup>25</sup>

His allegiance to a literary as well as a political role helps to explain why, at moments when he experienced particular exasperation with the fruitless machinations

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<sup>22</sup> J. Sungolowsky «Flaubert, Zola et la futilité de la politique» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.59 (1985) p.85

<sup>23</sup> Weinberg, *Ironie et idéologie*, p.73

<sup>24</sup> D. Delas «Zola et la démocratie parlementaire 1871-1881» in *Europe, Revue Mensuelle* nos.468-469 (April – May 1968) p.36

<sup>25</sup> F. Mitterrand «Politique et littérature» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.52 (1977) p.6

of Parliament, he tended to take refuge in pointed proclamations of the infinite superiority of literature.<sup>26</sup> In this he was representative of a number of contemporary writers, among whom critical attitudes towards the Third Republic were particularly prevalent.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, his overriding concern with *la Vérité* – Colette Becker argued that he would happily have placed it above the Republican cry of «Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité»<sup>28</sup> – meant not only that he was inconsistent, but that he was proud to be so. Whereas other observers would have modified their criticism rather than appear hypocritical, Zola took a certain satisfaction in denying his former positions while reputedly remaining true to his own abstract truth. He would far sooner be seen to re-evaluate his own beliefs than to close his eyes to reality.

In terms of his political thought, much of his inconsistency can be understood in the light of an easily discernible – yet rarely confessed – utopian Republicanism. Although condemnation of political idealism was invariably high on Zola's agenda, he nonetheless appears himself to be a frustrated idealist, applying unattainable standards to political life and being bitterly disillusioned in consequence. Aimé Guedj has presented the problem succinctly, indicating the gulf between Zola's bitter criticisms of the Republic, and his apparently unshaken belief in non-intervention and ultimate Republican triumph. Thus although despairing of the present, his innate determinism leads him to conclude that «il faut travailler et laisser l'Histoire nous porter vers notre radieux avenir par le jeu naturel de ses lois.»<sup>29</sup> This apparent contradiction in his thought is essential for an understanding of his journalistic campaign of the 1880s.

Despite his inconsistencies, then, Zola was an observer whose political evolution betrays a certain – albeit unusual – logic, and can be seen as a coherent entity.

<sup>26</sup> For example in «L'encre et le sang» (Le Figaro, 11 October 1880) in *Une Campagne*, p.453

<sup>27</sup> K. Swart *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1964) p.142

<sup>28</sup> C. Becker «Républicain sous l'Empire» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.15

As in the case of Bourget, his commitment to earnest political engagement remained constant, and thus his earliest attempts to uncover and proclaim political “truth” are in the same line as his later defence of Dreyfus.<sup>30</sup> His very earliest political involvement was in 1869, when through a series of articles in *La Cloche* he began to make increasingly vitriolic criticisms of the Second Empire. Caught up in the impetus of events, he adopted the position of editor for the ephemeral *La Marseillaise* in 1870, fulfilled the role of secretary to Glais-Bizoin in the period the Government of National Defence and wrote a political chronicle of the Assembly at Bordeaux for *La Cloche* and *Le Sémaphore de Marseille*.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter his position became more ambiguous: refusing to declare his preference for either the *Communards* or the forces of repression, he maintained an unusually low profile during the Government of Moral Order. Increasingly strict censorship forced him not to sign his political chronicles, and so written indications of his attitudes and involvement are in any case rare between 1873 and 1880.<sup>32</sup> The 1880s saw more overt political engagement with the publication of his highly controversial *Campagne* in weekly instalments in *Le Figaro* during 1880-1881, after which he concentrated more on the political implications of his naturalist *Rougon-Macquart* series. But his involvement was far from being purely literary, and when elected representative of the fifth *arrondissement* of Paris in 1891, he explained that only the completion of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels separated him from more active participation on behalf of writers and the proletariat.<sup>33</sup> An interview with *Le Figaro* in 1893 likewise reveals his temptation to be drawn into more direct intervention, and this development is arguably reflected in his *Trois Villes*.<sup>34</sup> His

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<sup>29</sup> Emile Zola, quoted in Delas, «Zola et la démocratie» p.39

<sup>30</sup> Mitterrand «Politique et littérature» p.6

<sup>31</sup> J.-Y. Mollier «Zola et la politique» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.71 (1997) p.340

<sup>32</sup> Delas «Zola et la démocratie» p.31

<sup>33</sup> Mollier «Zola et la politique» p.340

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.342



*Nouvelle Campagne* of 1895-1896 and his eventual and historic intervention in the Dreyfus affair thus form the logical conclusion to the career of a man devoted to the defence of truth in all its forms and regardless of public outrage or apparent inconsistency.

Having thus established the contexts of Zola and Bourget's political involvement, it is necessary to consider their respective positions in the political domain, and to determine the inspiration for their journalistic campaigns. What circumstances in fact surrounded the writing of Zola's *Campagne*, and Bourget's *Essais* – both such obstinate criticisms of the Third Republic?

Above all, it is essential to emphasise that by the early 1880s Zola and Bourget were already on opposite sides of the political spectrum: Zola a determined, if somewhat embittered, Republican; Bourget rapidly gravitating towards a traditionalist stance, undeniably Catholic and monarchical. Neither is an entirely straightforward case, but each is sufficiently characteristic to be representative of a wider political tendency. Paul Bourget had in fact initially been Republican in outlook, inspired by a scientific and agnostic father, and as a young man had lived a bohemian life on the Left Bank.<sup>35</sup> But his unorthodox experiences had the rapid result of inspiring him to seek a deeper form of commitment and social usefulness in a literary career rooted in close observation of social and political life. The fact that he recognised some affinity with the decadent society he lived in did not modify the forcefulness of his condemnation – and Crister Garret argues that this was a means of purging his own guilt at having once succumbed to the temptations of a hedonistic existence.<sup>36</sup> Thus despite posing as an apologist for decadence in *Le Siècle Littéraire* in 1875,<sup>37</sup> he came

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<sup>35</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.108

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.261

<sup>37</sup> A. Feuillerat *Histoire d'un Esprit sous la Troisième République* (Paris, Plon, 1937) p.54

increasingly to recognise that a monarchical, hierarchical society firmly rooted in the Catholic faith was the only means of salvation for a nation menaced by the threat of internal collapse. By the time he came to write his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* in December 1881, he had lost whatever faith he had once had in representative politics, and the general tenor of his articles tended to be that the spread of democracy and capitalism in France was progressively undermining all institutions of social order. His evolution towards the Right was confirmed when in 1889 he published *Le Disciple*, a highly acclaimed and much debated work which sought to expose the dangers of the intellectual basis of the Third Republic.

Emile Zola, though writing from the opposite perspective, had a curiously similar motivation for the publication of his fiery *Campagne* in the years 1880-1881. Zola may have been uncompromising and sometimes inconsistent, but his fundamental Republicanism remained reasonably constant. Initially inspired by an earnest desire to alleviate social problems, he began to admire the utopian visions of the Republic proposed by Michelet and George Sand,<sup>38</sup> and was greatly inspired by the liberal thinkers he encountered while working at the Librairie Hachette.<sup>39</sup> But the real development of his political thought came through his involvement with the Assembly in 1871. Already campaigning for a democratic and parliamentary regime in *La Tribune* and *Le Rappel*, he now found himself confronted by the very system that he had so far believed would ensure France's salvation. And here came Zola's first bitter disappointment. For far from establishing the regenerative Republic that he had hoped for, the Assembly seemed only to demonstrate a political stagnation that Zola found

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<sup>38</sup> Becker «Républicain sous l'Empire» p.9

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.12

deeply frustrating. It was understandable that the Right should seek to obstruct progress, but the Left seemed to be equally guilty,<sup>40</sup> and the same debates occupied the attention of Parliament for weeks in succession, with no apparent progress. Already in December 1871 Zola was sufficiently disillusioned to comment that: «le Parlementisme est une belle invention qui permet de causer des après-midi entiers sans rien dire»<sup>41</sup> and by early 1872 he was regarding parliamentary life as nothing more than a farce, referring in his articles to «la comédie parlementaire.»<sup>42</sup>

By 1880, however, his dissatisfaction had deepened still further. In 1879, the resignation of MacMahon had led to the Republican faction filling most of the main political and administrative positions – but with seemingly little effect on the progress of politics. Initially convinced that new elections would revitalise political life, Zola was forced to face the possibility that the parliamentary system itself might be at fault – and further decades of fruitless activity would undoubtedly result if no immediate action were to be taken. His reaction was to accept the offer of Francis Magnard, editor of the conservative *Le Figaro*, to carry out «une campagne indépendante qui choque les satisfaits de la République officieuse.»<sup>43</sup> For over a year he produced weekly condemnations of the farcical nature of political life, modifying his criticism only on the advice of Henry Céard, and eventually completing his task with a proclamation of his undiminished faith in France's future.

And so it was at the very same time that Paul Bourget was undermining the Third Republic in his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* that Emile Zola was launching equally violent criticisms of the regime in his *Campagne*. A coincidence,

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<sup>40</sup> Delas «Zola et la démocratie» p.27

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.30

<sup>42</sup> *La Cloche*, 27 March 1872, quoted in Delas «Zola et la démocratie» p.30

<sup>43</sup> Zola, *Une Campagne*, Introduction, p.427

perhaps, but more intriguing still is the parallel that can be drawn between their various comments and complaints, despite their firm allegiances to Left and Right respectively. What specific criticisms do they make of the Third Republic, and how closely can these be compared?

Firstly, although Zola is theoretically in favour of democracy and Bourget is definitively against it, their criticisms of the ideological bases of the regime are clearly inspired by similar concerns. Paul Bourget's disapproval of the democratic system is understandable: believing as he does in the need for a traditional society to revitalise France, he attributes the current state of decadence to the over-enthusiastic application of Republican principles, reflecting mournfully that «le siècle a manqué son oeuvre».<sup>44</sup> It is not so much that Bourget dislikes Republican principles as that he feels them to be purely illusory, based on a logic that is without firm foundation. His portrait of Joseph Monneron in his later novel *L'Etape* is a case in point. Ernest Seillière criticised Bourget for what he claimed was an anachronistic picture: Monneron is nothing more than the incarnation of the principles of 1789, too clearly Rousseauist in inspiration to be believable.<sup>45</sup> This may be true, but it is nothing more than Bourget himself tells us when he describes Monneron as being «un exemplaire absolu du Jacobin à la date de cette année de 1900 – autant dire du Jacobin tout court.»<sup>46</sup> Bourget's portrait of Monneron is revealing, because at surface value he is portrayed as being beyond reproach: a mild-mannered, kindly, retiring idealist. But it is this very idealism which Bourget so harshly criticises. Monneron may claim to be rational and freethinking, but he is in reality «un fanatique à rebours»<sup>47</sup> - strict and uncompromising in judgement,

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<sup>44</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.168

<sup>45</sup> E. Seillière *Paul Bourget, Psychologue et Sociologue* (Paris, Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1937) p.221

<sup>46</sup> P. Bourget *L'Etape* (Paris, Plon, 1911) p.10

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10

and far more intolerant in practice than the clerical party he condemns. Believing, in true Republican tradition, that human nature is fundamentally good, that Reason will triumph over religion, and that France is heading inexorably towards a democracy that promises unending liberty and equality, Joseph Monneron is forced through unhappy experience to recognise the fallibility of his principles. Monneron is of course the personification of Republican France, and in Bourget's *Essais* this same criticism is applied to the nation as a whole. Here, Bourget makes clear that the eighteenth-century philosophers whose ideas were central to the Revolution are responsible for France's current plight, as their generous ideals take no account of human failings and weaknesses.<sup>48</sup> Following the theories of Taine, for whom he maintained a great respect, Bourget argues that humans are neither instinctively fraternal nor yet intrinsically equal.<sup>49</sup> The democratic system, founded on illusory principles of equality and meritocracy, thus creates inevitable disillusionment by raising such hopes as can never be fulfilled. It is for this reason that Bourget condemns *l'esprit démocratique* as being one of the three most prevalent forms of decadence of the Third Republic, the result of the revolutionary legacy «dont l'influence désastreuse éclate aux yeux.»<sup>50</sup>

Zola's criticism of democratic doctrine, though written from the opposite perspective, is in fact remarkably similar in both content and logic. He too condemns idealistic republicans as being out of touch with their times: just as Bourget refers to Monneron as being «un fanatique à rebours»<sup>51</sup> so does Zola condemn idealistic republicans as being «des catholiques retournés, à genoux devant les dogmes».<sup>52</sup>

Victor Hugo in particular frequently serves as the object of his scorn for preaching

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<sup>48</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.59

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.187

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.55

<sup>51</sup> Bourget, *L'Étape*, p.10

<sup>52</sup> Zola «La Politique expérimentale» in *Une Campagne*, p.571

such an obscure and mystical doctrine:

«Qu'on nous dise de quel monastère du douzième siècle il sort avec son déisme nuageux, ses cauchemars de moine secoué de fièvre mystique!»<sup>53</sup>

With such hostile comments directed at one of the idols of the Third Republic, it is scarcely surprising that Zola was criticised for his apparent lack of Republican sympathy. Indeed, Duret had already informed him in 1868 that «ce qui excite d'ailleurs la rage et les colères contre vous, c'est que vous n'êtes pas démocrate».<sup>54</sup> And yet although Zola consciously condemns Republican idealists, he himself betrays frequent evidence of idealism. Certainly he never intends to attack the basis of the Republic - «attaquer la République? Mon Dieu! Non: je suis républicain»<sup>55</sup> - and he trusts absolutely in the inevitability of the Republican form of government.<sup>56</sup> He is thus incensed when accused of betraying this ideal, claiming in *Les Trente-Six Républiques* that he alone recognises the Republic in its true form.<sup>57</sup> Nor does he theoretically condemn the democratic form that the Third Republic has adopted, proclaiming at the end of his *Campagne* that:

«C'est l'avènement de la démocratie qui renouvelle notre politique, notre littérature, nos mœurs, nos idées. Je constate un fait, rien de plus.»<sup>58</sup>

If the parallel between Zola and Bourget is thus complex in theory, it is nevertheless clear in practice, where both recognise the failings and inadequacies of the democratic system. Zola's criticism of universal suffrage is perhaps the most

<sup>53</sup> Zola «Victor Hugo» in *Une Campagne*, p.463

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Becker, «Républicain sous l'Empire» p.14

<sup>55</sup> Zola «M. le Comte» in *Une Campagne*, p.505

<sup>56</sup> «Personnellement, je crois qu'une évolution emporte tous les peuples vers la République...» (*Une Campagne*, p.569)

<sup>57</sup> Zola «Les trente-six Républiques» in *Une Campagne*, pp. 441-446

<sup>58</sup> Zola «La démocratie» in *Une Campagne*, p.650

pertinent example:

«Certes, le principe du suffrage universel me paraît inattaquable. C'est le seul outil de gouvernement d'une logique absolue... Du moment que les hommes interviennent avec leurs folies et leurs infirmités, la logique mathématique du suffrage universel est détruite.»<sup>59</sup>

For universal suffrage is based on a myth of equality, which Zola, following in the footsteps of Taine and thus also of Bourget, is forced to admit is often elusive in practice. Taine, as quoted by Paul Bourget, warns the public that «une bête féroce mal endormie peut se réveiller dans chacun de nous. Décrétez-vous la royauté du peuple si vous le voyez composé de la sorte?»<sup>60</sup> Zola might well have had this passage in mind when describing how the precision of universal suffrage is inevitably unbalanced by «la bête humaine lâchée avec ses vanités et ses misères»<sup>61</sup> leading to corruption and mediocrity. And he is too fervent in his belief in the true Republic to condone those who make use of the regime for their own ends.

It is this question of mediocrity that both Zola and Bourget choose as the main focus for their arguments against the existing regime. Although their solutions to the problem are noticeably different, both make extremely similar condemnations of a Republic that, after ten years of political debate, seems to have produced few strong characters or inspired political solutions. Jean-Yves Mollier argues that this was entirely to be expected – after all, the mediocrity of political life was a direct consequence of the change of regime, during which the former notables had given way to new politicians without previous experience.<sup>62</sup> For Bourget, certainly, such a result seemed hardly surprising. A democracy may logically base its government on

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<sup>59</sup> Zola «Le suffrage universel» in *Une Campagne*, p.633

<sup>60</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.189

<sup>61</sup> Zola «Le suffrage universel» *Une Campagne*, p.632

<sup>62</sup> Mollier, «Zola et la politique» p.343

universal suffrage, but the meritocracy that it claims to offer is, like its very principles, a myth. Much of the failure of this democratic promise can be understood through a study of the education system which, while theoretically offering equal opportunities, leads only to ultimate disillusionment. By offering grants to bright pupils, the system allows potential political leaders to reach a high level of intellectual training – only to leave them confronted by a closed political system, an exclusive parliamentary caste inaccessible to those without the appropriate social connections.<sup>63</sup> And thus the individualism promoted by the regime leaves only frustrated hopes and the triumph of mediocrity. Indeed, the democratic system is in its working decidedly unfavourable to *hommes supérieurs*, whose views and solutions are far too subtle to appeal to the average voter:

«Il ne faut pas une grande vigueur d'analyse pour reconnaître qu'inévitablement aussi le suffrage universel est hostile à l'homme supérieur.»<sup>64</sup>

Since these *hommes supérieurs* have complex approaches to social and political problems, their manifestos are not necessarily appealing to the popular opinion upon which democracy is based, and so they are forced either to discard their beliefs or else to abandon their political ambition. And thus the nation is left to suffer the effects of a «médiocre et sénile démocratie».<sup>65</sup>

Zola's approach to the problem of mediocrity is slightly different, for even though he is essentially making the same complaints, his Republican sympathies cause him to rebel against the conclusion that this is the inevitable result of a democratic regime. It is again indicative of his unspoken idealism that he laments the proliferation of political non-entities who fail to correspond to his high standards for political life.

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<sup>63</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.246

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77



His exasperation was in 1880 far from new – while chronicling the progress of the Bordeaux Assembly in June 1871 he had commented pointedly in *La Cloche*:

«Par grâce, faites cela pour moi, nommez des hommes de talent afin que je ne m’endorme plus pendant les séances!»<sup>66</sup>

Ten years later he is addressing similar comments to M. Ranc – apparently mediocre in both politics and journalism, and fearful of accepting high-ranking positions lest his ineptitude be revealed<sup>67</sup> – and M. Floquet, who is dismissed as «médiocre avec une rage froide. C’est de l’obstination dans de la nullité».<sup>68</sup> The fact that Charles Floquet referred to Zola as a «démoralisateur public»<sup>69</sup> may well have had some bearing on this criticism, and it is worth noting that those whom Zola condemns most forcefully as being mediocre often appear to have made equally critical remarks of his work. This is not entirely unrelated to Zola’s further criticism that politics seems to have become increasingly dominated by personal concerns rather than by issues of national importance, and that the Press takes an excessive and unhealthy interest in such trivial matters.<sup>70</sup> And through all Zola’s criticisms appears his frustrated idealism, his exasperation that such mediocrity should be able to exist in a Republic which theoretically favours the entry of its most intelligent and talented citizens into the political domain. In a monarchical society, a hierarchical society in which birth alone decides position, such a level of mediocrity might be tolerated, but not in a Republic.<sup>71</sup>

The solution to this surfeit of mediocrity is, as both Zola and Bourget see it, to develop some kind of “scientific” approach to the problems of government: the scientific method which they both approve of in literature must also be applied in the

<sup>66</sup> Zola, quoted in Delas «Zola et la démocratie» p.28

<sup>67</sup> Zola «Un homme très fort» *Une Campagne*, p.436

<sup>68</sup> Zola «Futur ministre» *Une Campagne*, p.471

<sup>69</sup> Henri Mitterand in Zola, *Une Campagne*, Notes, p.687

<sup>70</sup> Zola «Bêtise » in *Une Campagne*, p.495

<sup>71</sup> Zola «Un homme très fort» *Une Campagne*, p.436

political domain. Bourget is undoubtedly unusual among Right wing critics in approving so whole-heartedly of the progress of Science, often regarded in such circles as being a dangerous threat to the survival of religious belief. Fully aware of this allegation, Bourget nonetheless claims that such fears are irrational and without foundation: Science, he argues, does not so much defy the existence of religious belief as deny the possibility of making claims in the metaphysical domain.<sup>72</sup> He may demonstrate a certain habitual caution in accepting the benefits of Science without reserve, but he cannot suppress his general approbation:

«Celui qui jette ses regards sur le développement scientifique de cette première moitié du siècle, après avoir contemplé la misère des autres entreprises, peut-il retenir un élan d'admiration?»<sup>73</sup>

Following the recommendations of Taine, Bourget proceeds to assert that the scientific method is so reliable that it should be freely applied in all domains,<sup>74</sup> not least because it seems to him to justify his traditionalist vision. Democratic doctrine, he argues, is too clearly rooted in mystical and misguided ideals to be able to weather the test of experience, and this scientific test demonstrates all too well that inequality and suffering are inescapable facts. Better, then, to construct a political system which accords with such truths than to try to ignore them in the interests of optimistic escapism. Thus, the coming battle is not between Science and religion but between Science and democracy, «ces deux grandes forces de la société»<sup>75</sup> and Science will of necessity be triumphant:

«Bref, cet enseignement de la Science est la négation totale des faux dogmes de 1789 et il faudra bientôt que le vingtième siècle s'y conforme, mais il lui faudra, pour

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<sup>72</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.62

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.171

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.58

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.70

cela, lutter contre la démocratie et ranger définitivement cette forme inférieure de sociétés à son rang de régression mentale.»<sup>76</sup>

According to Bourget, Science will prove that traditional beliefs and customs are firmly rooted in the French mentality, and in demonstrating the importance of heredity will justify the transmission of nobility from generation to generation.<sup>77</sup> It will thus favour the gradual evolution of society and so avoid unnecessary turmoil – and Bourget refers specifically to the Paris Commune, the result of violent social and political change.<sup>78</sup>

The link between Science and 1870 is also made by Zola, who in his *Lettre à la Jeunesse* argued that «en 1870 nous avons été battus par l'esprit scientifique.»<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, Zola makes quite clear that the scientific method is not the monopoly of the Republicans - «Il faut poser nettement que la politique scientifique n'est pas plus républicaine que monarchique»<sup>80</sup> - although he does nevertheless believe that the scientific method will lead inevitably to the Republic. His vision of a scientific government is also, as Jean-Yves Mollier argues, strongly technocratic in flavour, anticipating visions of government developed in the twentieth century.<sup>81</sup> More so than Bourget, he feels that Science is indisputably progress, and just as he condemns his enemies with allegations of mediocrity, so does he exalt his heroes by praising their scientific outlook. Thus Gambetta's political expertise is declared void on account of its unscientific nature, whereas Clemenceau is seen as promising a far more positive way forward:

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<sup>76</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.71

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.70

<sup>78</sup> Bourget's horror of violence in politics is emphasised by Crister Garret in *Paul Bourget*, p.319

<sup>79</sup> E. Zola «Lettre à la Jeunesse» in *Le Roman Expérimental* (Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1971) p.130

<sup>80</sup> Zola «La politique expérimentale» *Une Campagne*, p.569

<sup>81</sup> Mollier «Zola et la politique» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.71 (1997) p.342

«celui-là est un esprit scientifique de la plus réelle valeur.»<sup>82</sup>

Proclaiming his faith in *la politique expérimentale*, Zola argues with the same logic as Bourget that the government of a country must not be based on dogma but rather on experience, taking into account the circumstances of the nation, and its hereditary beliefs and customs.<sup>83</sup> He even admits that it would be pointless to try to found a Republic in a country with no intellectual basis of Republicanism – and he cites Russia as an example<sup>84</sup> – as a regime must not be imposed but rather allowed to evolve naturally. And yet despite this reliance on experience, this desire to found a government in accordance with «la race, l'histoire et le milieu contemporain»<sup>85</sup> Zola still believes, with a deterministic fatalism, that a perfect Republic will somehow evolve of its own accord:

«La République est une conséquence logique, qui s'impose d'après les lois fixes.»<sup>86</sup>

One further means of resolving mediocrity which both Zola and Bourget touch on – if somewhat cautiously - is the possibility of an *homme fort* to lead the regime out of its decline with positive action. The confidence of both writers in the role of the writer to guide and enlighten the masses thus transforms itself into the call for an intellectual elite to direct political life. Henri Bordeaux recalls Paul Bourget commenting that «l'amour du peuple ne doit pas se confondre avec l'abandon au peuple. L'élite seule est apte à conduire les hommes»<sup>87</sup> and Crister Garret also argues persuasively that Bourget believes in the efficacy of writers and specialists in

<sup>82</sup> Zola «Gambetta» *Une Campagne*, p.492

<sup>83</sup> Zola «La politique expérimentale» *Une Campagne*, p.568

<sup>84</sup> Zola «La République en Russie» *Une Campagne*, pp.562-568

<sup>85</sup> Zola «Les trente-six Républiques» *Une Campagne*, p.443

<sup>86</sup> Zola «Le parti de l'indignation» *Une Campagne*, p.450

<sup>87</sup> Bordeaux «Le souvenir de Paul Bourget» p.604

politics.<sup>88</sup> Not that this makes him unable to admit the efficacy of strong politicians – on the contrary, he is firmly in favour of those whom he terms *hommes supérieurs*, and claims that:

«L'homme supérieur est une des machines les plus précieuses que la société ait a son service.»<sup>89</sup>

He further argues that the relatively successful and smooth-running political life enjoyed in England is a direct result of the rule of such *hommes supérieurs* as Macaulay, Gladstone and Disraeli.<sup>90</sup> Such an intellectual elite is much needed to replace France's weak and ineffective democracy – but the combination of strength of character and intelligence is disappointingly elusive in the political sphere. Pointing to the example of Napoleon III, Bourget argues that a firm hand alone is not sufficient: a man of genius is required who will both command respect and also integrate new ideas into tradition.<sup>91</sup>

Zola's rather similar suggestions have been much criticised by other Republicans as being anti-democratic in tone. François Mitterrand argues that Zola intended to undermine party politics completely in the interests of a governing elite,<sup>92</sup> and Daniel Delas has intimated that Zola's restless quest for «un homme fort» anticipates Boulangist sentiment, even though Boulangist were predominantly anti-Republican.<sup>93</sup> Certainly, Zola felt that strong characters should dominate politics – as they do in his *Rougon-Macquart* series<sup>94</sup> – and his virulent anti-parliamentarian attitude is undeniable. Indeed, he was never entirely convinced of the value of equality –

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<sup>88</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.131

<sup>89</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.66

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.66

<sup>91</sup> Crister Garret argues that it was for this reason that he respected Napoleon I (*Paul Bourget*, p.154)

<sup>92</sup> Mitterrand «Politique et littérature» p.222

<sup>93</sup> Delas «Zola et la démocratie» p.34

<sup>94</sup> I.-M. Frandon «La pensée politique d'Emile Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* nos.8-9 (1957) p.373

believing, like Bourget, that the country would be far better governed by an intellectual elite:

«Seuls les hommes supérieurs devraient être appelés aux affaires, comme les plus dignes et les plus intelligents de la nation.»<sup>95</sup>

Both Zola and Bourget, then, shared remarkably similar reactions to the political stagnation of the Third Republic in 1880. Both sought to analyse the failings of the regime through careful study and criticism of the democratic doctrine on which the regime was founded, and deplored the mediocrity of political life which so frequently resulted. Both, too, suggested the application of a scientific method to government as a means of resolving the stalemate situation, and the possibility of instating an intellectual elite, or of entrusting the salvation of the country to a single *homme fort*. Yet the two writers were of opposite political tendencies, one Republican and anti-clerical, the other Catholic and monarchist. How, then, is this similarity to be interpreted? Are their views purely idiosyncratic and thus unrepresentative of their true political allegiances? If not, then how far is each symbolic of a wider reaction? And how can their similar perspectives be accounted for?

Certainly, Zola has frequently been accused of idiosyncratic opinions. Daniel Delas finds no ultimate logic in his criticisms, describing them as «le cri d'un naïf... toujours déçu»<sup>96</sup> - and he quotes Henri Mitterand's argument that Zola proposed some of the classic themes of Right wing thought.<sup>97</sup> Mitterand is frequently quoted as having labelled Zola Right wing - but in fact this is a misrepresentation of his argument. What he actually argues is that, although Zola's desire for national union and an *homme fort* are superficially Right wing, he is nonetheless firmly on the Left in

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<sup>95</sup> Zola «Un homme très fort» *Une Campagne*, p.439

<sup>96</sup> Delas «Zola et la démocratie» p.36

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.35

both thought and action.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Zola's *Campagne* provoked a resounding echo of approval and agreement, as well as condemnation, and sales of *Le Figaro* increased dramatically.<sup>99</sup> Far from being an isolated critic, Zola appears to have been fulfilling the very role of the intellectual outlined in Max Beloff's *The Intellectual in Politics*; that of formulating widely felt but often unexpressed fears and aspirations within society.<sup>100</sup> As Jean-Claude Cassaing and Henri Mitterand argue:

«Il reflète aussi bien que des idées avant-garde les fantasmes, les inquiétudes, voire les régressions de tout un groupe social.»<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, as Roger Ripoll demonstrates, Zola was surprisingly well representative of the opinions of fellow Republicans - and his disappointment at the needless divisions and conflicts in politics was reflected in a considerable number of Republican newspapers at the time.<sup>102</sup> Equally, his allegations of mediocrity were widely echoed – not least in *L'Événement* by the writer Aurélien Scholl<sup>103</sup> (who was ironically termed mediocre by Zola himself.)<sup>104</sup>

Still more significantly, Zola's *Campagne* was published in a conservative and even monarchist newspaper. This, combined with the close comparison which can be made between his views and those of Paul Bourget, suggests an even wider hypothesis: that criticisms of the Third Republic in the 1880s were in fact shared across political and religious boundaries. Criticising party conflicts, challenging the theory and practice of universal suffrage, appealing for “scientific” government and strong leadership – all these were themes that were freely expressed by citizens of all political

<sup>98</sup> H. Mitterand *Zola Journaliste: de l’Affaire Manet à l’Affaire Dreyfus* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1962) p.225

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p.226

<sup>100</sup> Beloff, *The Intellectual in Politics*, p.12

<sup>101</sup> J.-C. Cassaing and H. Mitterand «Zola et la République» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.4

<sup>102</sup> R. Ripoll «Littérature et politique dans les écrits de Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.45

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p.44

<sup>104</sup> Zola «Nos hommes d’esprit» *Une Campagne*, p.587

persuasions. Such an observation relates interestingly to the work of Zeev Sternhell, a controversial historian best known for his theories on the origins of French fascism. His argument is not only that French fascism had its roots in the 1880s, but also that the political polarisation into radical Left and Right at the end of the century can be traced back to a common reaction to Third Republican decadence:

«Fascisme et Marxisme sont des produits d'une même réalité sociologique, et tous deux se veulent une option de remplacement total de l'ordre libéral».<sup>105</sup>

Sternhell's theories are not always entirely convincing – he assumes, for example, that those attracted to Right wing ideas will inevitably approve of fascist regimes<sup>106</sup> - but his basic hypothesis still stands firm, and makes a fruitful comparison with the evidence offered by the works of Zola and Bourget. The two writers are clearly from opposite sides of the political spectrum, one representative of Republican thought, the other of a Counter-Revolutionary tradition incorporating all the main arguments of contemporary Right wing criticism. Arguably because of their fervent commitment to national renewal through positive action, both feel frustrated by a parliamentary regime which offers only constant compromise and concession. Liberalism is inadequate to solve the urgent problems of a decadent nation – determined political action is not only desirable but also essential if ultimate chaos is to be avoided. And thus both writers condemn with equal fervour the mediocrity of parliamentary life, and the failings of democratic doctrine when put into practice. Both also suggest positive and forceful approaches in the form of scientific government and strong national leadership. But from common condemnations Zola and Bourget progress towards essentially conflicting solutions, each an antidote to liberalism, but in

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<sup>105</sup> Z. Sternhell *La Droite Révolutionnaire: les Origines Françaises du Fascisme 1885-1914* (Paris, Seuil, 1978) p.403

<sup>106</sup> R. Wohl "French fascism, both Left and Right: reflections on the Sternhell controversy" in *Journal of Modern History* Vol.63 (March 1991) p.94



a very different manner. Indeed, the two writers continued to travel in diametrically opposite directions in the political domain, each heading towards his own utopia. Bourget, so wary of proposing any definitive solutions in his *Essais*, came in his later novels to make a clear commitment to traditionalism in its most orthodox form, seeing himself as the intellectual descendant of De Bonald and De Maistre.<sup>107</sup> Equally, he formed increasingly close links with Maurice Barrès, whose nationalism he greatly admired, and with Charles Maurras, whom he trusted would revitalise political life.<sup>108</sup> His obituaries praise him as a great conservative thinker, and Léon Daudet emphasised «l'intérêt affectueux qu'il a toujours eu pour l'Action Française».<sup>109</sup> Zola, on the other hand, evolved to become increasingly idealistic in his Republican views, offering a utopian vision of the future which critics have always found disconcerting and difficult.<sup>110</sup> David Baguley, a rare exception to this rule, argues that Zola's later works give an invaluable image of his ideal Republic: a humanitarian, liberal and secular regime based on popular sovereignty and patriotism.<sup>111</sup> His morality may be heavy-handed in these later works, but his views are nonetheless representative of important trends in Republican thought at the turn of the century.<sup>112</sup> And thus while Bourget represents the growing trend on the Right towards the mystic nationalism of Maurice Barrès, Zola reflects the commitment by many on the Left to increasingly extreme forms of socialism and syndicalism as a means of obtaining social change.

In his fourth gospel – *Vérité* – Zola described the Third Republic as «une moitié cléricale et réactionnaire, une moitié républicaine et progressiste, toujours en

<sup>107</sup> Bourget, *Essais* (Préface de 1899) p.xi

<sup>108</sup> Bordeaux «Le souvenir de Paul Bourget» p.605

<sup>109</sup> *Action Française*, 25 December 1935 (Colindale Library Microfiches, M.F.4)

<sup>110</sup> David Schalk, for example, criticises those who think Zola's later works unworthy of him, but makes largely similar allegations himself in his article «Zola et l'histoire: l'historien et Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.67 (1993) pp.47-57

<sup>111</sup> D. Baguley «Du récit polémique au discours utopique: L'Evangile républicain selon Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.114

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119

lutte.»<sup>113</sup> Certainly he was perceptive in his criticism, yet as demonstrated by the journalistic campaigns of Zola and Bourget, dissatisfaction with the regime of the 1880s could be surprisingly similar on both Left and Right. Zola's *Campagne* and Bourget's *Essais*, though faithful to very different political solutions, nonetheless offer a closely comparable criticism of democratic doctrine and the mediocrity of parliamentary politics, while stressing the need for strong and scientific government. Echoes of these criticisms can be found throughout society and in spite of deep political and religious divisions. Furthermore, although Zola and Bourget share a strong degree of disillusionment with the regime, their proposed solutions, and the consequent evolution of their political positions, give an insight into a much wider phenomenon. Not only does the comparison between their complaints allow an insight into shared fears and preoccupations, but their eventual evolution gives an understanding of how Third Republican society became increasingly polarised, as Left and Right sought to offer their own radical solutions to the problem of democratic decadence.

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Baguley, «Du récit polémique» p.117

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *The triumph of order: Zola, Bourget and the class struggle*

«Il y a, dans la société actuelle, une barricade dressée et dont personne n'est responsable, ni les bourgeois, ni les ouvriers. Elle s'impose aux uns comme aux autres.»<sup>1</sup>

If Paul Bourget and Emile Zola were concerned to study the problems of politics in a decadent society, then they were equally preoccupied with the social question. The impact of class warfare on the Third Republic was inescapable, for it was during this period that the working classes made a late but dramatic entry into the centre of the political stage. In 1870, idealistic Republicans had attempted to deny the very existence of the social question, but by 1910, when Bourget's *La Barricade* was first performed, class antagonism had become an undeniable fact of French society. How did Zola and Bourget react to this growing social tension? Their social utopias were certainly far removed – Zola's *Germinal* was celebrated by delegations of miners at his funeral as a resounding triumph on their behalf,<sup>2</sup> whereas Bourget's *L'Etape* and *La Barricade* were both powerful condemnations of working class ambition. Bourget felt that the French Revolution had taken social change too far: Zola believed that the necessary evolution had scarcely begun. But were their attitudes to the class struggle in practice entirely dictated by such ideological allegiances? How far were both writers influenced by contemporary theories of social Darwinism, and what comparison can be drawn between their portrayal of socialist leaders, working class consciousness, and revolutionary fervour? Did common fears of social disorder actually lead to a common

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<sup>1</sup> P. Bourget *La Barricade – Chronique de 1910* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1910) Preface, p.xxix

<sup>2</sup> A. Vial *Germinal et le «Socialisme» de Zola* (Paris, Editions Sociales, 1975) p.108

defence of the bourgeois Republic?

Certainly, the early Third Republic witnessed an unprecedented evolution in the formation of class-consciousness – and class antagonism. The industrialisation of France came later than in either Britain or Germany – but census counts between 1866 and 1906 began to demonstrate considerable net growth in urban population,<sup>3</sup> and Gérard Noiriel argues that the 1880s witnessed the emergence of collective representation, and the development of the modern worker movement.<sup>4</sup> Trade Unions were legalised in 1884, and membership grew significantly: although only 200, 000 workers were union members in 1890, this number had increased to one million by 1914,<sup>5</sup> and local activity began to be paralleled by national organisation. Noiriel emphasises the importance of such organisation in bringing cohesion to an otherwise disparate movement;<sup>6</sup> Michelle Perrot highlights the creativity and spontaneity that it tended to suppress<sup>7</sup> – but there is no doubt that unions were highly instrumental in the dramatic increase in strike activity. Perrot has identified 2973 strikes that occurred between June 1871 and December 1890, and argues that they were rapidly becoming a familiar feature of the working class world.<sup>8</sup> Such militancy should not obscure the fact that working class organisation was still in its infancy: in the 1880s, socialism was little more than a series of opposing factions – and, as Roger Magraw indicates, unions and socialist parties were often in dispute over means and objectives.<sup>9</sup> But despite these divisions, and although the revolutionary rhetoric of the strikers was rarely as violent in practice as it was in theory,<sup>10</sup> working class militancy nonetheless fuelled the

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<sup>3</sup> G. Noiriel *Workers in French Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford, Berg, 1990) p.77

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73

<sup>5</sup> R. Magraw *A History of the French Working Class* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992) Vol. 2 p.99

<sup>6</sup> Noiriel, *Workers in French Society*, p. 92

<sup>7</sup> M. Perrot *Les Ouvriers en Grève: France 1871-1890* (Paris, Mouton, 1974) Vol. 1 p.11

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59

<sup>9</sup> Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, p.98

<sup>10</sup> Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en Grève*, Vol. 2 p.724

increasing fears of class warfare that were beginning to unsettle the Third Republic. The bourgeoisie was not, it seemed, to rule forever unchallenged - for with the introduction of universal suffrage, the working class entered politics, and in 1893, 50 nominal "socialists" were elected to Parliament.<sup>11</sup> Opposition began to harden on both sides, so much so that the sense of struggle could often exceed the reality. Jules Guesde, the leader of one of the socialist factions, argued that in their duty to oppose the capitalist Republic, the workers should view the Republican bourgeois and his Catholic Royalist counterpart as equal enemies.<sup>12</sup> And members of the bourgeoisie, whether Catholic or Republican, were often tempted to view the working class activists with a similarly uniform antipathy.

This concept of bourgeois - and in a wider sense Republican - defence has received relatively little attention in comparison to working class militancy, but is, as Sanford Elwitt argues, invaluable for an overall understanding of the class struggle. Elwitt's contention is that the late nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a comprehensive bourgeois policy of social management, and that this policy led to a remarkable consensus among otherwise disparate sections of the bourgeoisie.<sup>13</sup> There is of course nothing like a common enemy to bring forth common defence, but Elwitt argues that this was not so much a negative reaction as a positive implementation of a programme of social control, a redefinition of the relationship between classes. Working class insurgency was thus met with a programme of corporate paternalism - an attempt at comprehensive control of the professional and social lives of the workers through a series of co-operatives, technical training, working class housing, company

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<sup>11</sup> Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, p.81

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86

<sup>13</sup> S. Elwitt *The Third Republic Defended* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1986) p.2

unions and adult education.<sup>14</sup> As such techniques were not dictated by party politics, Elwitt argues that they gained the support of all whose stance on the social question was predominantly conservative. Political groupings were, he suggests, rendered meaningless by a need for Republican defence that crossed economic, cultural and religious divisions, and “previously unthinkable political alignments became commonplace.”<sup>15</sup> Elwitt tends to exaggerate the contrast between the class-conscious bourgeoisie of the 1890s and their “liberal and democratic” counterparts of the 1870s, and it is hard to believe that the evolution of a policy of social management was quite as systematic as he asserts. Nonetheless, his thesis is overall a strong one.

It is in fact within the context of this hypothesis that the comparison between Zola’s and Bourget’s reactions to the class struggle is most valuable. Zola’s *Germinal*, and Bourget’s *L’Etape* and *La Barricade* were all written with specific reference to class conflict, each destined to provide a scrupulously detailed consideration of the issues at stake. Zola composed *Germinal* with the express intention of giving the unsuspecting bourgeois reader «un frisson de terreur»<sup>16</sup> and Bourget explained in his introduction to *La Barricade* that he had aimed to provide «une peinture de tout un coin de la vie industrielle du pays.»<sup>17</sup> All three works are also closely comparable in the themes that they examine – each focuses on a young idealist whose initial allegiance to socialism is severely challenged by an encounter with working class organisations and revolutionary disorder. Zola’s Etienne Lantier joins the miners of Montsou in their strike to protest against a reduction in wages, but is appalled at the uncoordinated violence that results: Bourget’s Jean Monneron (*L’Etape*) becomes

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<sup>14</sup> Elwitt, *The Third Republic*, p.7

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.291

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in C. Becker *Germinal – Etudes Littéraires* (Paris, PUF, 1984) p.42

<sup>17</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, Preface p.ii

disillusioned with the socialist utopia after his experience of a popular university, and Philippe Breschard (*La Barricade*) renounces socialism when the workers in his father's furniture workshop go on strike. All three works were similarly controversial in the reactions that they provoked: Bourget was alternately praised and condemned for his defence of traditional society,<sup>18</sup> and Zola was both criticised as an "anti-establishment progressive"<sup>19</sup>, and also accused of having written «un roman anti-peuple.»<sup>20</sup> It is this curious ambiguity in Zola's position that provides the starting point for the comparison. Was it really possible for Zola to be anti-establishment in theory but «anti-peuple» in practice? Were there in fact any similarities between the two writers' theoretical concepts of class struggle? And could it be argued that Zola and Bourget shared sufficient perceptions of the class struggle in practice to justify Elwitt's hypothesis of a conservative consensus?

Certainly, although Bourget's and Zola's theoretical positions on the class struggle were diametrically opposed, and representative on a wider scale of the conflict between monarchists and Republicans, both writers were clearly subject to prevailing intellectual currents. Their awareness of social Darwinism is a point worth considering in particular detail. This philosophy did not necessarily derive from the ideas of Darwin himself, but was an ideological system evolved by a number of European and American intellectuals, notably Herbert Spencer.<sup>21</sup> As Robert Niess argues, social Darwinists often entirely ignored Darwin's ideas on co-operation, reducing his theory of evolution to its most basic form in order to justify *laissez-faire* capitalism.<sup>22</sup> Arguing that the struggle for survival was not so much between a species and its

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<sup>18</sup> René Doumic, for example, praised *L'Étape* as being «au premier rang parmi les romans d'aujourd'hui» in *Le Journal des Débats*, 16 December 1902 (Colindale Library Microfiches, M.F.21)

<sup>19</sup> B. Nelson *Zola and the Bourgeoisie* (London, Macmillan, 1983) p.4

<sup>20</sup> Becker, *Germinal*, p.6

<sup>21</sup> R. Niess «Zola et le capitalisme: le darwinisme social» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.57

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57

environment as between competing social classes, their philosophy was selfish and individualistic, favouring the triumph of base instincts. In its most extreme form, social Darwinism could be used to justify racism and eugenics, claiming that the ruling classes were powerful only because of racial superiority. Such theories were highly influential in the late nineteenth century, and it is noticeable that Spencer and his successors were usually anti-democratic and conservative in tendency.<sup>23</sup> This is significant in terms of the comparison between Zola and Bourget. Both were clearly influenced by social Darwinist theories, and there is in fact in both cases a noticeable tension between this belief in an amoral struggle for social survival, and a continuing faith in a more static and harmonious utopia.

Bourget, for example, affirmed in his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* that «la Science démontre que les deux lois de la vie sont la continuité et la sélection»<sup>24</sup>, and often made use of this theory in order to justify the transmission of nobility from one generation to another. He also recognised that in a state of social decadence, a degenerate ruling class would risk suffering at the hands of the “barbarians”:

«Le grand argument contre les décadents, c'est qu'elles n'ont pas de lendemain et que toujours une barbarie les écrase.»<sup>25</sup>

Zola's acceptance of social Darwinist theory was more overt, and Robert Niess goes so far as to argue that his *Rougon-Macquart* series constitutes a veritable breviary of social Darwinism, particularly with reference to political and economic questions.<sup>26</sup> With specific reference to *Germinal*, Jean-Louis Vissière has pointed out that Zola's philosophy seems influenced by both Marxism and Darwinism, in that the miners are

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<sup>23</sup> Niess «Zola et le capitalisme» p.60

<sup>24</sup> P. Bourget *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1899) p.274

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.17

<sup>26</sup> Niess «Zola et le capitalisme» p.62



called to exterminate the current ruling classes in a re-enactment of 1793.<sup>27</sup> He further points out that the class struggle in *La Débâcle* is envisaged in biological terms as a struggle for survival.<sup>28</sup> Certainly these arguments seem to have some justification in that Zola had already affirmed his belief in Darwinism in *Le Roman Expérimental*, and if *Germinal* betrays some suspicions with regard to working class capability to rule, it nonetheless suggest the potential for a violent - even barbaric - seizure of power:

«S'il fallait qu'une classe fût mangée, n'était-ce pas le peuple, vivace, neuf encore, qui mangerait la bourgeoisie épuisée de jouissance?»<sup>29</sup>

Social Darwinism thus forms an important point of contact in the theoretical domain, from which Zola and Bourget then progress towards very different social utopias, representative of two conflicting traditions and political groups. In each case the proposed social ideal seems based on the intersection of social Darwinist tendencies with a residual acceptance or rejection of socialist theory.

Bourget's evolution towards a traditionalist stance led him to proclaim a static and hierarchical society as the ideal solution to the current decadence. Drawn to traditionalist thought as early as 1872, he was progressively influenced by the ideas of de Bonald, Comte, Balzac, Taine, Renan and Le Play,<sup>30</sup> and explained that his duty lay in the propagation and continuation of their social solutions. Believing that the energy of the French Revolution had been essentially «mal réglé», resulting in social anarchy, he was convinced that society needed to be re-ordered in accordance with natural laws, human nature, and observed social phenomena.<sup>31</sup> To begin with, this meant the

<sup>27</sup> J.-L. Vissière «Politique et prophétie dans *Germinal*» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* nos. 20-22, Vol.8 (1962) p.167

<sup>28</sup> Vissière «Politique et prophétie» p.167

<sup>29</sup> E. Zola *Germinal* (Pocket Classiques, 1990) p.545

<sup>30</sup> E. Seillière *Paul Bourget, Psychologue et Sociologue* (Paris, Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1937) p.193

<sup>31</sup> J. de Bonne *La Pensée de Paul Bourget* (Paris, Editions Sociales et Politiques IX, Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1913) p.49

recognition of all classes as having essential, but fundamentally different roles to play. Writing his preface to *La Barricade*, for example, Bourget deplored the class war as wilful ignorance of the workings of society, a futile and ill-fated attempt by the workers to take “rightful” control of production rather than to accept their assigned and subservient role:

«La guerre actuelle des classes, c’est proprement la révolte du muscle contre le nerf.»<sup>32</sup>

*La Barricade* is indeed particularly indicative of Bourget’s belief in a hierarchical society in that the most sympathetically delineated worker is the patient and resigned Gaucherond, unswervingly obedient to the family whose firm he has served for 46 years, and who yearns for the return of the old corporations:

«Ah! Si leurs syndicats étaient ça, seulement! Mais on y reviendra. Patience!»<sup>33</sup>

As Bourget does not fail to indicate, such a hierarchical society is justified not only by experience, but also by scientific laws. In the study of Renan’s aristocratic preferences that he makes in his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*, Bourget argues that the increasing emphasis on heredity that is the result of scientific research surely justifies hereditary monarchy and nobility:

«Elle aboutit dès aujourd’hui à une conception du droit historique qui justifie les adeptes du droit divin, à une théorie de l’hérédité qui justifie le principe de l’aristocratie humaine.»<sup>34</sup>

Thus, while he is prepared to admit that noble families can sometimes become degenerate, he refuses to accept that they are capable of losing their fundamental nobility of character. Rumesnil, the aristocratic dilettante in *L’Etape* who amuses

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<sup>32</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, Preface p.xlii

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.70

<sup>34</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.70

himself by dabbling in socialism, nonetheless retains sufficient innate nobility to pretend that the attempt on his life by the bourgeois Julie was merely an accident:

«C'était le gentilhomme, chatouilleux sur le point d'honneur comme un raffiné de l'ancien régime.»<sup>35</sup>

Equally, Bourget is led by this theory to propose a hereditary monarchy as the ultimate solution to the class struggle, believing in the efficacy of a single judge whose verdict is capable of restoring order: «la présence, au sommet de la hiérarchie sociale, d'un arbitre suprême, qui serait le prince, dans une Charte de Travail...»<sup>36</sup>

Bourget's ideas, particularly when expressed so uncompromisingly in *La Barricade*, did not go without criticism. Charles Martel wrote crushingly in *L'Aurore* on 8 January 1910 that:

«M. Paul Bourget, fortifié dans son tour de sommeil, n'admet aucune évolution sociale. Chacun doit rester dans sa classe d'avant '89, à l'exception toutefois de certains hommes de lettres...»<sup>37</sup>

Such criticisms are understandable in the context of *La Barricade*, whose message regarding class repression is particularly harsh, but not in the context of Paul Bourget's overall work, which often betrays a much more subtle and complex vision of social evolution. Perhaps the incensed Charles Martel had not read Bourget's *Essais*, or his novel *L'Etape*, where he argues not so much that social evolution is impossible, but rather that it must take place gradually rather than precipitately. It is here that we see the conflict in his thought between the static hierarchy that he believes is the real utopia, and his admission of gradual evolution which, if taken to its logical conclusion, would actually result in the mixing of classes that he so frequently condemns. In his

<sup>35</sup> P. Bourget *L'Etape* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1911) p.119

<sup>36</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, Preface p.xlv

<sup>37</sup> *L'Aurore*, 8 January 1910 (Colindale Microfiches M.F. 153)

*Essais*, he refers to «ce passage des classes les unes dans les autres, forme naturelle du fonctionnement de la démocratie, d'où résulte peut-être toutes les complications sentimentales de notre âge.»<sup>38</sup> But the basic argument of *L'Etape* is that it is possible for a family to ascend the social ladder, even though this must be attempted only over the course of several generations. Joseph Monneron, the son of a peasant farmer who has risen through his own merits to become a university professor, suffers the results of this rapid change in status in the rootless disorder of his own children, unable to adapt so swiftly to the demands of bourgeois society. Antoine, characterised by «une sensibilité brutale, plébéienne et avide»<sup>39</sup> is so frustrated by the family's comparative lack of means that he is driven to forgery, and Julie, «la victime d'une sensibilité en désaccord avec son milieu»<sup>40</sup> becomes involved a disastrous liaison with the aristocratic Rumesnil. Only Jean, who gradually accepts Bourget's own traditionalism, recognises that the family would have been far happier in its original rural context, proclaiming that «on ne change pas de milieu et de classe sans que des troubles profonds se manifestent dans tout l'être.»<sup>41</sup> The basic moral would seem to be that no attempt should be made to leave one's class – but ironically Bourget's father was himself a model for Joseph Monneron, and had he not risen from his peasant origins, Bourget would never have been a member of the bourgeoisie. The combination of Bourget's traditionalism with his social Darwinist tendencies can thus at times lead to contradiction and even hypocrisy.

Despite these complexities, however, Bourget's social ideals were widely representative, particularly of the arguments of contemporary Catholic writers. The support of a hierarchical society, the encouragement of patient resignation within one's

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<sup>38</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.134

<sup>39</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.46

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.322

class, especially in a rural context – all these were popular themes in late nineteenth-century Catholic literature. As Pierre Pierrard has argued, the tradition of the social question in Catholic literature went back to the 1840s, and novels in this vein were published in vast quantities until the end of the century.<sup>42</sup> The question of socialism itself was treated with particular virulence – socialists and revolutionaries were indiscriminately evil, «une bande de faux prophètes»<sup>43</sup> - and Oscar de Poli commented in his *Fleurs de Lis* (1885) that the French Revolution was nothing more than «un mirage toujours décevant qui dissimule la tombe, l'abîme...»<sup>44</sup>

Paul Bourget was not quite as Manichean in outlook, but he certainly shared in this condemnation of socialism as based on misleading and utopian ideals. Already in 1883, he had proclaimed that «la faillite des rêves socialistes ou libéraux paraît définitive»<sup>45</sup> and both *L'Etape* and *La Barricade* were intended as salutary warnings to any who might be tempted to think otherwise. Bourget reacted indignantly to the accusation that he had «diffamé les ouvriers et embelli complaisamment les patrons»<sup>46</sup> - and argued that his presentation of the furniture workshop in *La Barricade* was closely based on his own interviews with various managers. This in itself explains his perspective. Bourget's workers are reasonably credible, but they are portrayed from an entirely bourgeois viewpoint, and his attitude towards socialism is similarly inspired. Neither in *L'Etape* nor in *La Barricade* are we given any indication of poor working conditions or low pay – indeed, Bourget seems to be arguing that working class militancy is entirely the result of subversive leadership. Breschard, the owner of the furniture workshop in *La Barricade*, is by no means a soulless capitalist – indeed, he is

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<sup>42</sup> P. Pierrard «Question ouvrière et socialisme dans le roman catholique en France au dix-neuvième siècle» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.50 (1976) p.189

<sup>43</sup> Alphonse Viollot, quoted in Pierrard «Question ouvrière» p.184

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.187

<sup>45</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.169

<sup>46</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, Preface p.xviii

perfectly willing to listen to any individual demands that the workers may make. But, in accordance with the tendency so typical of the times, he refuses to recognise the legitimacy of strike action. Bourget himself is unreservedly sceptical of socialist ideology, which he sees as an encouragement of social disorder resulting from fundamentally unsound beliefs. The *manifestation* in *L'Etape* is merely one example of

«le sauvage aspect réservé à notre pays si jamais les enfantines doctrines du socialisme y triomphent: celui d'un asile d'aliénés, débarrassé de ses gardiens.»<sup>47</sup>

Although betraying a similar conflict between social Darwinism and a more static utopia, Zola's social vision is very much opposed to that of Bourget – at least in theory. Both writers recognised the value of work as a source of dignity and identity, but whereas Bourget was more impressed by the concept of service,<sup>48</sup> Zola expressed a belief in a double religion of life and work,<sup>49</sup> and looked to a society which would exalt rather than suppress the role of the worker. The ideal which so enthuses the miners of *Germinal* is Etienne's image of a meritocracy in which work is truly appreciated: «une ville immense, d'une splendeur de mirage où chaque citoyen vivait de sa tâche et prenait sa part des joies communes.»<sup>50</sup> This ideal is later expanded in his utopian work *Travail*, a highly controversial study which Henri Mitterand believes to be representative of a Fourierist community, and which David Baguley argues is inspired by the obsession with socialism at the turn of the century.<sup>51</sup>

Zola's work may be inspired by socialism, but it is far from straightforward in its treatment and presentation of socialist doctrine. Although Jean-Louis Vissière

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<sup>47</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.295

<sup>48</sup> Henri Bordeaux recalls that service was one of the concepts most revered by Bourget in his article «Le souvenir de Paul Bourget» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol.37 (Jan-Feb 1937) p.602

<sup>49</sup> Vial, «*Germinal*» et le Socialisme, p.102

<sup>50</sup> Zola, *Germinal*, p.186

<sup>51</sup> D. Baguley «Du récit polémique au discours utopique: l'Evangile républicain selon Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.113

argues that Zola can be seen to hesitate between three kinds of socialism in *Germinal* – violent struggle, individual terrorism, and organised collective action<sup>52</sup> – he seems in fact determined to show the failings of all of these theories. As in his political thought, he appears to be torn between a belief in the need for personal intervention, and a more fatalistic conviction that social evolution will “germinate” of its own accord, that the Darwinistic class struggle is inevitable. As Brian Nelson argues, his scientific, positivistic ideology is in constant conflict with his more pessimistic view of an anarchic society based on the survival of the fittest.<sup>53</sup>

Such a contradiction, however, was by no means purely idiosyncratic – indeed, it was common among social Darwinists of many persuasions. Herbert Spencer himself believed that, even if violent and individualistic struggle had to dominate the immediate future, nevertheless a time would come when man would be free, work would be voluntary, and individual property would be firstly national and finally communal.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Zola was also widely representative in believing that whatever form social evolution might take, it was ultimately necessary so as to improve working class conditions. Both Zola and Bourget prided themselves on the accuracy of their respective presentations of the workers, but whereas Bourget remains distant, Zola’s depiction of the working classes in *Germinal* is an inside view intended to bring working conditions forcefully to public attention. Relying heavily on his own experience of the strikes at Anzin and the activities of the *Parti Ouvrier Français*, and on his assiduous reading of *Le Cri du Peuple*, Zola intended to highlight the conflict between work and the oppressive, impersonal Capital that the miners regard with such

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<sup>52</sup> Vissière «Politique et prophétie» p.167

<sup>53</sup> B. Nelson “Zola’s ideology – the road to utopia” in D. Baguley (ed.) *Critical Essays on Emile Zola* (Boston, G. K. Hall, 1986) p.165

<sup>54</sup> Niess «Zola et le capitalisme» p.60

fearful awe.<sup>55</sup> Pierre Aubéry has cited the novel as a remarkable example of sympathy for and even identification with the workers,<sup>56</sup> and Colin Smethurst has argued that, whatever Zola's claims to impartiality, *Germinal* is an indisputable case of committed literature.<sup>57</sup> As Zola himself wrote to Georges Montorgeuil in March 1885:

«Peut-être cessera-t-on cette fois de voir en moi un insulteur du peuple. Le vrai socialiste n'est-il pas celui qui dit la misère, les déchéances fatales du milieu, qui montre le bagne de la faim dans son horreur? Si le peuple est si parfait, si divin, pourquoi vouloir améliorer sa destinée?»<sup>58</sup>

Few critics shared Zola's fervent belief in the novel's scientific pretensions: Henry Céard, who had first lent Zola the books by Claude Bernard which he was to read so avidly, refused to believe that a literary work could lay claims to similar exactitude.<sup>59</sup> But Zola replied to him in a letter of 22 March 1885 that he intended *Germinal* to be both factual and symbolic:

«J'ai l'hypertrophie du détail vrai, le saut dans les étoiles sur le tremplin de l'observation exacte. La vérité monte d'un coup d'aile jusqu'au symbole.»<sup>60</sup>

In theory, therefore, Bourget and Zola might appear to be almost entirely opposed in their social visions. Although each demonstrated a certain allegiance to social Darwinist ideology, Bourget's traditionalism led him to reject all forms of socialist thought, whereas Zola's awareness of the urgent need to improve working class conditions made him a determined advocate of reform. But what in fact were their reactions to the class struggle in practice? Zola might champion the cause of

<sup>55</sup> P. Walker "Germinal" and Zola's Philosophical and Religious Thought (Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages Vol.14, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1984) p.1

<sup>56</sup> P. Aubéry «Imitations de Jésus chez Zola: *Germinal*» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.53 (1979) p.32

<sup>57</sup> C. Smethurst *Emile Zola – "Germinal"* (London, Arnold, 1974) p.62

<sup>58</sup> E. Zola *Correspondance* (ed. B. H. Bakker) (Paris, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1985) Vol.5 p.240

<sup>59</sup> Walker, "Germinal", p.5

<sup>60</sup> Zola, *Correspondance*, p.249



reform, but did he actually encourage working class rule? How do Zola and Bourget portray the threat of revolution, and how fundamental is their attachment to their own class?

Certainly their shared belief in the need for gradual social evolution results in a slightly cautious portrayal of socialist leaders. Zola represents three very different strands of socialist doctrine and action in the characters of the Marxist Etienne, the Russian anarchist Souvarine, and the more pragmatic and circumspect Rasseneur – and in none of these cases is he entirely uncritical. Colin Smethurst is convinced of Zola's marginal contempt for Rasseneur, overly cautious, and unwilling to co-operate with the other leaders for the sake of the common good.<sup>61</sup> Souvarine fares no better in his judgement: coldly isolated from his companions and surroundings by his conscious refusal of emotional attachment, he aims to accomplish his goals by cold-blooded destruction:

«Il allait, de son air tranquille, à l'extermination, partout où il y aurait de la dynamite pour faire sauter les villes et les hommes.»<sup>62</sup>

Even Etienne, with whom Zola appears to identify most closely, is criticised when he begins to feel superior to his class, transformed by his emerging power and by his increasingly bourgeois culture and education. His notions of social revolution are initially vague and utopian, and he never entirely resolves the question of the means to be employed in order to realise his goals. He is redeemed in Zola's eyes only by his capability to evolve through learning and experience, by his progress from naïve idealism to a more rational understanding of the task to be accomplished. His initial indignation on behalf of the workers is portrayed as noble but unfocused, and it is only

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<sup>61</sup> Smethurst, *Emile Zola – "Germinal"*, p.41

<sup>62</sup> Zola, *Germinal*, p.498

by the end of the novel that his learning process is complete:

«Son éducation était finie, il s'en allait armé, en soldat raisonneur de la révolution...»<sup>63</sup>

It is by the same token of experience that Bourget condemns indiscriminately all socialist leaders who claim to use the *Union Tolstoï* described in *L'Etape* as a means of promoting working class education and political evolution. The series of lectures, whose diverse subjects include the religious policy of Louis XIV, the mathematical calculation of probability and the poetry of Baudelaire, may be noble in inspiration, but they are nothing more than an «orgie d'inassimilables connaissances»<sup>64</sup> to those workers for whose benefit they are intended. Like Zola, Bourget is sceptical of the relationship between well-intentioned and idealistic leaders, and the as yet uneducated and blindly trusting people:

«Il savait, pour l'avoir éprouvé amèrement...l'entière inutilité de ces rapports factices entre travailleurs de l'esprit et travailleurs manuels, où ceux-là ne font que s'abaisser, sans élever ceux-ci.»<sup>65</sup>

Bourget's depiction of the leaders of the *Union Tolstoï* is thus critical in the extreme: the Jewish Crémieux-Dax is seen to be shady and calculating, the aristocratic Rumesnil is but a dilettante toying with socialism, and Riouffol, a poor relation of the central Monneron family, is bitter through frustrated ambition. The gospel of social justice and equality that such leaders preach to the people is destined not only to raise unrealistic hopes but also to incite subversion and anarchy. And were it not for the implicit message of hope in the final pages of *Germinal*, one might reasonably assume Zola's feelings on the matter to be identical.

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<sup>63</sup> |Zola, *Germinal*, p.544

<sup>64</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.99

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.58

This parallel is interestingly broadened with a comparison of the images of revolution that permeate the two novels. Zola commented to a newspaper editor in December 1885 that «*Germinal* est une oeuvre de pitié et non une oeuvre de révolution»<sup>66</sup> yet the novel is clearly intended both as an evocation of the spirit of 1789 and also as a warning of potential revolution to come. The title of the novel recalls the working class riot of 12 Germinal An III, when the people broke into the Assembly demanding «du pain et la constitution de 1793» – the most democratic constitution devised during the revolution, though never actually implemented. Likewise the prolonged strike and initially latent violence of the workers lead the bourgeois Hennebeau and Grégoire families to fear another *Grande Peur*, as in the summer of 1789.<sup>67</sup> As for the strike itself, it stands as a dark warning of future conflict:

«C'était la vision rouge de la révolution qui les emporterait tous, fatalement, par une soirée sanglante de cette fin de siècle.»<sup>68</sup>

There is no doubt as to the contemporary relevance of such imagery, inspired not only by the violence witnessed during the Commune but also by concern at the return of political exiles in 1880, and by the increasing numbers of anarchist riots and explosions.<sup>69</sup> The overwhelming impression given by such descriptions is one of fear and foreboding: any image of the revolution as triumphant is lost in the sense of a dangerous release of natural forces and animal instincts. Colette Becker's argument that despite his sympathy for the workers, Zola was genuinely afraid of their revolutionary potential<sup>70</sup> is certainly born out in descriptions of the strike, where the initially rigid discipline and organisation gives way to an animal violence dictated by

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<sup>66</sup>Quoted in Vial, «*Germinal*» et le Socialisme p.95

<sup>67</sup> Zola, *Germinal*, p.228

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.370

<sup>69</sup> Smethurst, *Emile Zola – "Germinal"*, p.43

<sup>70</sup> Becker, *Germinal*, p.125

hunger and revenge. It is a violence that is not tempered even by family ties or comradeship; la Maheude has to be restrained from attacking her daughter Catherine for attempting to return to work, and Etienne finds himself completely unable to control his fellow workers:

«Plus de deux mille cinq cents forcenés, brisant tout, balayant tout, avec la force accrue du torrent qui roule.»<sup>71</sup>

Such images of violence and chaos are equally strongly emphasised in *L'Etape* and *La Barricade*, where so-called revolutionary zeal provides a pretext for the expression of powerful primitive instincts. In *La Barricade*, the former socialist Philippe condemns this latent chaos in no uncertain terms, commenting to his father that «tu vois l'enfant en eux. Moi, je vois la brute qui sommeille et qui va mordre».<sup>72</sup> The strike that takes place is thus used to demonstrate the extent to which the workers are merely «la dupe des gréviculteurs»,<sup>73</sup> increasingly alienated from themselves and from each other in the unthinking violence of their actions. Likewise, the *Union Tolstoï* provides ample evidence of what Bourget describes as «ces appétits plébéiens qui vont si sauvagement à la réalisation de leurs désirs.»<sup>74</sup> The *manifestation* in protest against a lecture to be given by a modernist priest is a reflection of the latent violence in such revolutionary fervour – Bourget describes in fearful fascination «des visages convulsés, des bouches qui s'ouvraient pour crier, des yeux que la fureur égarait.»<sup>75</sup> Like Zola, he sees in even relatively minor incidents a microcosm of the class struggle that provokes family divisions and turns worker against worker: the *manifestation* unleashes such basic feelings of revenge or superiority that even the high-minded Jean

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<sup>71</sup> Zola, *Germinal*, p.356

<sup>72</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, p.233

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.144

<sup>74</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.213

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.293

Monneron finds himself despising his poor relation Riouffol.

«Il se dégageait de cette scène une contagion de guerre civile si intense que Jean lui-même s'y laissait prendre...»<sup>76</sup>

Small wonder, then, that Bourget should regard the plans for social reform proposed by the *Union Tolstoï* and by the trade union in *La Barricade* with such nervous trepidation. There is a sense in the novels of both Zola and Bourget that political awareness among the working classes is a force as yet unfocused and untamed. Even Zola, though in favour of democratic rule, portrays the workers as still lacking in the maturity necessary for them to assume power, and both writers intend their novels to alert the reader to the very real danger that may result from a failure to take seriously the threat of working class revolution. In each case the imagery has apocalyptic overtones: Bourget sees working class rule as a threat to the very foundations of established society and religion, Zola sees in socialism a new religion ideally preoccupied with tangible improvements rather than with abstract hopes of eternal life, but actually an often unfocused and dangerous energy.

It is this latent - and sometimes overt - fear of social chaos and anarchy which is crucial in determining both Zola's and Bourget's attitudes towards the bourgeoisie. They may hold very different social ideologies, but both are undeniably preoccupied with the question of order, and when faced with the dangers of class conflict in practice, it is this principle of order which must first and foremost be seen to be upheld. Their common belief in social Darwinism, and fearful respect for Taine's theory that animal instincts are rarely far below the surface cause both to uphold the role of the bourgeoisie – Zola at times unwillingly – as essential for the control of volatile human passions.

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<sup>76</sup> Bourget, *L'Étape*, p.294

Bourget's allegiance to the bourgeoisie was almost unswerving, although by no means automatic, and in his celebrated introduction to *Le Disciple* he praised «la brave classe moyenne, la solide et vaillante bourgeoisie, que possède encore la France!»<sup>77</sup> Equally, he yearns in his works for the conviction «d'avoir servi utilement ma classe et par conséquent mon pays.»<sup>78</sup> He further assumes that the characteristics of his class are honesty and integrity, for when accused of painting an over-flattering portrait of Breschard, the manager of the workshop in *La Barricade*, he affirms that he has merely made him representative of his social group:

«Il est honnête et droit en affaires, c'est vrai. Pourquoi lui aurais-je prêté une moralité inférieure à la moyenne de sa classe?»<sup>79</sup>

Bourget was also accused of encouraging the class war, to which he responded indignantly that he simply recognised it, with some reluctance, to be inevitable. Ideally, as he implies in his novels, society should be hierarchical and harmonious, with each class accepting its role as necessary to the overall social order. But since the working class is deliberately alienating itself, and furthermore attempting to redefine its role, no option remains open to the bourgeoisie but to oppose proletariat energy with reciprocal repression: «à la barbarie ouvrière opposer la barbarie patronale.»<sup>80</sup> It is not that Bourget approves of repression in itself, purely that a class struggle is a conflict of vast forces rather than individuals, and thus subversion on one side must be met with reaction on the other if any form of equilibrium is to be maintained. The same idea of an insuperable barricade between classes is applied on an individual level, and any friendships across class barriers in *La Barricade* are shown to be fragile and easily broken.

<sup>77</sup> P. Bourget *Le Disciple* (Paris, Plon, 1901) p.iv

<sup>78</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, Preface p.lix

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.xviii

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.liv

Although proclaiming this necessity for reaction, «ce mâle sursaut que la bataille éveille dans les races encore capables de vaincre,»<sup>81</sup> Bourget does not automatically accept bourgeois supremacy. Like Flaubert, Bourget condemns the parasitism of those sections of the bourgeoisie who use their material advantages for purely selfish ends, without seeking to transform them into «instruments de supériorité intellectuelle et politique.»<sup>82</sup> The bourgeoisie may have a theoretical right to rule, but they must also be prepared to demonstrate their moral and intellectual superiority before justifiably assuming power. As he concludes in the words of Breschard,

«L'ouvrier...c'est un excitable. Il faut le tenir. C'est notre fonction à nous, les dirigeants. On nous donnait ce nom autrefois, et c'est très beau. Reméritons-le, en étant les plus forts.»<sup>83</sup>

Zola's relationship with the bourgeoisie has been the subject of extremely heated controversy among critics, but while it seems impossible to describe him as fully sympathetic towards his own class, he does nevertheless admit that they alone have the required energy and self-control to maintain social order. Colette Becker is certainly justified in stressing Zola's extensive use of irony in his presentation of the bourgeoisie<sup>84</sup> - the whole *Rougon-Macquart* series focuses on the theme of the inevitable degeneration of a society dominated by their pleasure-seeking individualism and hypocrisy<sup>85</sup> - «cette ivresse mesurée et décente des gens du monde qui se grisent à petits coups.»<sup>86</sup> In *Germinal*, the dramatic contrast between the oppressive luxury of the bourgeois managers and the pitiful conditions of the workers is highlighted by Zola's evocative descriptions of the Grégoire household. The material welfare acquired

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<sup>81</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, p.lix

<sup>82</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.108

<sup>83</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, p.234

<sup>84</sup> Becker, *Germinal*, p.122

<sup>85</sup> Nelson, "Zola's ideology" p.164

<sup>86</sup> E. Zola *La Curée* (Paris, Librairie Charpentier, 1938) p.38

at the expense of the workers is for them «la bienfaitrice du foyer, les berçant dans leur grand lit de paresse, les engraisant à leur table gourmande.»<sup>87</sup> The Grégoire family automatically assumes that the bourgeois managers are morally superior to their employees, and dismiss the sufferings of the miners as being entirely self-induced, the inevitable consequence of excessive drinking and unnecessarily large families. And like many of his predecessors, notably Lamartine, Hugo and Flaubert, Zola takes pains to stress the contradiction between the “enlightened” Republican ideology professed by the bourgeoisie, and their actual treatment of the workers.<sup>88</sup>

But surely Zola’s attitude here is not so far removed from that of Bourget? Fundamentally, his main criticism of the bourgeoisie is that they are hypocritical, that their dominance must be justified by moral and intellectual superiority – the same argument that Bourget also uses extensively. For whatever his theoretical allegiance to socialism, it seems that Zola is in practice committed to supporting the rule, if not of the bourgeoisie as a whole, then certainly of those bourgeois individuals who demonstrate sufficient energy and self-discipline. He may be fascinated by the conflict of vast forces, yet he can never deny an inherent bourgeois fear of uncontrolled energy, whether expressed in the dissipation of the bourgeoisie or in the revolutionary fervour of discontented workers. Direction and moderation are essential to Zola’s social vision, and he resolutely believes that they co-exist most effectively within the context of bourgeois leadership.

Brian Nelson expounds this argument with particular force, even if he sometimes over-emphasises the degree of Zola’s admiration. He argues, for instance, that one of the prototypes for Zola’s messianic image of the redeeming bourgeois

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<sup>87</sup> Zola, *Germinal*, p.94

<sup>88</sup> Vial, «*Germinal*» et le Socialisme, p.28



leader is Aristide Saccard of *La Curée*<sup>89</sup> on account of his obsessive desire for power and his ruthless determination. Certainly, Zola respects the energy of this particular character – but it is important not to neglect the satirical element in his portrait of Saccard and Renée, «le mari et la femme, ces deux fièvres chaudes de l'argent et de plaisir...»<sup>90</sup>

In general, however, Nelson's argument is a persuasive synthesis of Zola's social thought. Without always fully approving of their actions, Zola does tend to present individual bourgeois characters as being most suited to social control. In *Germinal*, Hennebeau is admired by the miners for his energy and physical courage, even risking his life to save those trapped in the collapsed mine, and most sympathetic bourgeois character is Deneulin, the dedicated and paternalistic manager of a small colliery.<sup>91</sup> The same enlightened social leadership is advocated in *Travail*, where despite the high status accorded to work, the workers themselves play little part in the organisation of *La Crèche*, which is dominated by the paternalistic Luc Froment.<sup>92</sup> In this context, it is worth remarking that Zola's own life was a tribute to the bourgeois values of hard work, discipline and moderation, disturbed only by his liaison with Jeanne Rozerat and his intervention in the Dreyfus affair.<sup>93</sup> And thus it would appear that, as André Vial argues, «le coeur de Zola est donc acquis au prolétariat. Le coeur, non point son esprit».<sup>94</sup> Despite his sympathy for the workers, he believes that only the bourgeoisie are capable of realising social reform.

It would not be possible – nor indeed valuable – to argue that Zola was representative of the majority of socialists in his attitude towards bourgeois leadership.

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<sup>89</sup> Nelson, "Zola's ideology" p.165

<sup>90</sup> Zola, *La Curée*, p.111

<sup>91</sup> Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie*, p.27

<sup>92</sup> Nelson, "Zola's ideology" p.166

<sup>93</sup> Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie*, p.23

<sup>94</sup> Vial, «*Germinal*» et le Socialisme, p.95

But what is significant is that he represented a substantial number of bourgeois observers who, if they accepted socialist ideals in theory, were nonetheless considerably more cautious and defensive in their reaction to the class struggle in practice. The comparison between Zola and Bourget is illuminating in that it demonstrates not only the wide-ranging influence of social Darwinist philosophy, but also the number of fears and reservations concerning class conflict that were shared across political and religious boundaries. Bourget might propose a harmonious hierarchical and monarchical society, and Zola a meritocracy based on the value of work, but in practice both were almost equally suspicious of socialist leaders, revolutionary fervour, and increasing working class consciousness. The threat of social anarchy was sufficient to make both writers similarly determined in their defence of social order, and in their support of a class capable of proving its innate superiority.

«Les classes sociales sont comme les nations. Elles n'ont pas le droit de conserver ce qu'elles n'ont plus l'énergie de défendre. Soyons donc forts, mais humains, je répète le mot, dans la force.»<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Bourget, *La Barricade*, p.234

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### ***Regenerating the nation: from racial decline to the cult of vitality***

«Quand une nation s'éprouve vivante, elle se conçoit mortelle.»<sup>1</sup>

Political instability and social disorder were two very visible forms of the decadence that appeared to be undermining the Third Republic. But were they merely symptoms of a more fundamental affliction? Had France perhaps been reduced to the role of a helpless victim, not only of the fluctuations of a faltering democracy but also of the devastating progress of racial decline? Was the process irreversible, or could it be demonstrated that there was some hope of renewal?

Emile Zola and Paul Bourget were both equally convinced that the nation itself was in the process of deterioration, and they were representative of a whole generation obsessed with the question of racial debasement and inferiority. The philosophical framework of heredity, race and milieu within which both writers understood the threat of degeneration reflected a widely held consensus, and both highlighted the role of the family as a context for this study, and as offering some potential for revitalisation. More importantly, however, their writings span a significant period of intellectual transition, a period when the positivism and scientism that had formed a largely unchallenged basis for their early works began to be undermined by new trends favouring an emphasis on subconscious energy and vitality. Although the idea that France was a decadent nation remained a pervasive one, the assumption that this decadence was somehow irremediable became increasingly suspect. How do the writings of Zola and Bourget reflect this changing understanding of degeneration, and what were their respective hopes for national renewal?

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<sup>1</sup> P. Citti *Contre la Décadence: Histoire de l'Imagination Française dans le Roman 1890-1914* (Paris, PUF, 1987) p.54

The medical model of racial decline had particularly far-reaching and disturbing implications, and had long been central to the debate on decadence.<sup>2</sup> Depopulation had prompted the first anxious analysis, for the French birth rate had been declining relative to that of its European counterparts since 1848, and aroused particular concern after 1870. During the Third Republic, the population increased at an average rate of only 89,000 per annum – compared with Germany's growth of over 600,000<sup>3</sup> – and a multitude of writings began progressively to associate this waning population with social and medical pathologies, from increases in crime rates and alcoholism to the spread of tuberculosis, syphilis, arthritis and mental illnesses.<sup>4</sup> The possibility of racial decline, first raised at the Academy of Medicine in 1867,<sup>5</sup> rapidly became a feature of national discussion. Arthur de Gobineau had already argued in his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-5) that the French race was in crisis as a result of the adulteration of the powerful Aryan breed by the inferior – not to mention temperamental – Mediterranean stock.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion was self-evident from the current dominance of the English, seen by Gobineau to represent a particularly pure form of the Aryan race. The widely respected provincial doctor Morel, who studied abnormal physical conditions such as cranial deviation, pointed ears, and the absence of secondary teeth, likewise concluded that racial decline was indisputable.<sup>7</sup> What was more disturbing, however, was the suspicion that this degeneration was being exacerbated by the tendency of scientific advancement to interfere with the process of natural selection. As Ribot wrote in his *Hérédité* of 1875, excessive tolerance was

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<sup>2</sup> D. Pick *Faces of Degeneration* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.56

<sup>3</sup> R. Nye "Degeneration, neurasthenia and the culture of sport in *Belle Epoque* France" in *Journal of Contemporary History* no.17 (1982) p.54

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53

<sup>6</sup> F. W. J. Hemmings *Culture and Society in France 1848-1898* (London, Batsford, 1971) p.211

<sup>7</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p.48

saving the lives of “countless weak, deformed, or otherwise ill-constituted creatures” who would not in more Spartan circumstances have survived.<sup>8</sup> The race was therefore doomed, and the conscious and aesthetic “decadence”, which revelled in dilettantism, nihilism, cosmopolitanism and nervous disorder, was both a reaction to and also a characteristic of this degenerate civilisation.<sup>9</sup>

But was decadence irreversible? If the literary “decadents” of the 1880s took a certain morbid pleasure in singing the swansong of a dying race, writers from the 1890s onwards were not always as resolutely pessimistic. Indeed, the word “decadence” seemed gradually to be losing its cult status – Benjamin Ball asserted in 1890 that he believed Morel’s deterministic model of irreparable decline to be entirely outdated,<sup>10</sup> and by 1912 Etienne Rey felt justified to comment in *La Renaissance de L’Orgueil Français* that:

«Nous sommes en train de nous apercevoir que notre prétendue décadence n’était qu’un mot.»<sup>11</sup>

How can such a change be explained? Zeev Sternhell has argued that the answer is clear – the 1890s witnessed an intellectual crisis, «un souffle de révolte» against the values inherited from the French Revolution, and the appearance of new ideologies in reaction to the triumph of scientific thought.<sup>12</sup> He refers to developments in contemporary psychology highlighting the role of the irrational, and to the widely influential Henri Bergson, who wrote in his *Introduction à la Métaphysique* (1903)

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<sup>8</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p.5

<sup>9</sup> E. Hansen *Disaffection and Decadence – a Crisis in French Intellectual Thought 1848-1898* (Washington, University Press of America, 1982) p.xi

<sup>10</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p.70

<sup>11</sup> K. Swart *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1964) p.193

<sup>12</sup> Z. Sternhell *Maurice Barrès et le Nationalisme Français* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1972) p.8

that: «Il y a une réalité au moins que nous saisissons tous du dedans, par intuition et non par simple analyse.»<sup>13</sup>

Such an assertion was a direct challenge to the positivistic hope that experimental evidence was the only route to human perfectibility and complete understanding. It would seem, indeed, that determinism was being superseded by an increasing suspicion that there was a mystery and complexity to life that even science could not fathom.

Raoul Girardet is less convinced, however – how could such an intellectual crisis co-exist with the evidence of so many determined supporters of scientific progress at the end of the century?<sup>14</sup> But Girardet seems to be ignoring the obvious – clearly the reaction against scientific thought was far from complete: its significance is rather that it involved a notable and vocal minority. The Banquet Berthelot - which took place on 4 April 1895 in celebration of scientific achievement - could, for example, be cited as an indication that such currents of thought were still strong.<sup>15</sup> But this is not to deny that even those who retained their faith in science, such as Zola himself, were prey to increasing anxiety at the attacks on scientism and positivism that were becoming ever more frequent and incisive. Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple*, published in 1889 to great acclaim, was one such determined attack, a significant literary landmark in being representative of «toute une série d'ouvrages, nés d'un autre esprit, gonflés d'une autre sève.»<sup>16</sup> As Albert Autin rightly remarks, a vast gulf can be seen to separate *Le Disciple* from deterministic works such as Zola's *Le Roman*

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<sup>13</sup> Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès*, p.16

<sup>14</sup> Raoul Girardet, introduction to *Maurice Barrès et le Nationalisme*, p.5

<sup>15</sup> J. Lalouette, «La querelle de la foi et de la science et le Banquet Berthelot» in *La Revue Historique*, Issue 608 (Oct-Dec 1998) p.827

<sup>16</sup> A. Autin *Les Grands Événements Littéraires - «Le Disciple» de Paul Bourget* (Paris, Société Française d'Éditions Littéraires et Techniques, 1930) p.8

*Expérimental*.<sup>17</sup> But Autin fails nonetheless to comment on the most significant detail, namely that this particular defence of scientific method was published over ten years previously. For by the 1890s even Zola's work was demonstrating the influence of these new intellectual currents – *Le Docteur Pascal*, for example, is both a testimony to a lifetime's devotion to science and also an admission of scientific limitations, and an appreciation of the mystery at the centre of life and creation. Just as the notion of milieu had once dominated the literary scene, so now did the notion of energy become all-important, the concept of hidden and creative forces that could potentially be channelled into beneficial use.

The effect of such new currents of thought on the question of degeneration was a decisive one. Just as determinism made decadence irremediable, so now did the increasing emphasis on energy and renewal lead to a search for potential solutions to the problem of racial decline. Initially, doctors and politicians had believed that the only cure would be to remove the degenerate elements from society,<sup>18</sup> but by the 1890s there was a tendency to believe that even degenerate individuals could be redeemed if their emotional and physical resources were to be revitalised. The discovery of radiation by Pierre and Marie Curie in 1898 further reinforced such expectations, being a form of energy that seemed to have unlimited potential in the necessary battle against dissipation and entropy.<sup>19</sup> It was within a similar context that increasing numbers of hygiene and purity groups began to combat alcoholism and moral disorders, and that the importance of physical culture and exercise began to receive national attention.<sup>20</sup> The *Ligue Nationale de l'Education Physique* - the most influential sports lobby of the Third Republic - was founded in 1881, and Victor Margueritte, who created the *Ligue*

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<sup>17</sup> Autin, *Les Grands Événements*, p.17

<sup>18</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p.67

<sup>19</sup> Citti, *Contre la Décadence*, p.123

<sup>20</sup> Nye, "Degeneration" p.57

*Républicaine d'Action Nationale*, argued forcefully that sport would revitalise the mind through the body, while reinforcing the "cult of energy" at a national level.<sup>21</sup> Nor was the concern with physical culture purely the concern of the Left, for in the 1880s certain Right Wing groups - such as the *Ligue des Patriotes* - were also encouraging organised sport as a means of regenerating the race.

It was this question of national regeneration, indeed, that provided what is arguably the greatest area of general agreement between Left and Right. How do Zola and Bourget demonstrate this consensus? What intellectual framework do they use as the context for their understanding of racial decline, and what are their respective attitudes to the family as an agent of national regeneration? How do the two writers exhibit the influence of the new intellectual currents of the *fin de siècle*, and how optimistic are they that the French race can be revitalised?

It might appear at first unlikely that Zola and Bourget could share an intellectual basis for the analysis of racial decline. Zola proclaimed himself to be determinist in his thought: following the theories of the eminent Prosper Lucas, he argued that an examination of heredity could be used in conjunction with a study of milieu and circumstances to provide a complete understanding of character.<sup>22</sup> Paul Bourget, on the other hand, composed *Le Disciple* as a deliberate attack on such methodology: the novel focuses on the confession of Robert Greslou, who conducts the "scientific" experiment of cultivating the affections of the aristocratic Charlotte Jussat-Randon purely to perform a brutal analysis of her feelings in response. The confession itself seems to be a parody of the naturalist doctrine: Greslou exonerates himself by blaming his actions on the successive influences of heredity, race, milieu and

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<sup>21</sup> Nye "Degeneration" p.61

<sup>22</sup> E. Zola *Le Docteur Pascal* in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1967) Vol.6, notes p.1408



circumstances. Anatole France and Ferdinand Brunetière were incensed by Bourget's implicit condemnation of their beliefs: Taine was still more deeply offended, believing the novel to be a personal attack and remarking in an indignant letter that:

«Je ne conclus qu'une chose; c'est que le goût a changé, que ma génération est finie.»<sup>23</sup>

But was *Le Disciple* nothing more than a parody? On closer examination, it appears not only that Robert Greslou is in many ways a self-portrait, but also that his confession is rooted in the intellectual framework that Bourget himself accepted. Bourget was not a determinist, always emphasising the role of individual choice, willpower and consequent responsibility, but he nevertheless accorded considerable importance to the guiding influence of heredity, race and milieu. Indeed, one has only to consider the structure of his own *Lettre Autobiographique*, written to M. Van Daell in 1894<sup>24</sup> to provide some psychological background to his works, to realise its striking similarity to Greslou's confession in *Le Disciple*, divided into the same analyses of heredity and milieu. Bourget's debt to Taine was clearly not so easily disregarded. Furthermore, the "medical" aspect of Bourget's work has been much remarked upon – for Bourget, like Zola, was fascinated by different pathological types, studied in great detail the development of neurosis and nervous exhaustion, and was conscious of a close parallel between physical and spiritual affliction.<sup>25</sup>

The question of heredity, so fundamental to the wider understanding of racial degeneration, was thus equally central to the works of both writers, even if Zola's attitude towards it was decidedly more deterministic. The gradual deterioration of his

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by G. Bernoville, *Célébrités d'Hier et d'Aujourd'hui – Paul Bourget* (Paris, Denoëlle et Steele, 1936) p.23

<sup>24</sup> P. Bourget *Lettre Autobiographique* in *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Gallimard, 1993) pp.449-456

<sup>25</sup> J. Grasset, *L'Idée Médicale dans les Romans de Paul Bourget* (Montpellier, 1904) p.20

Rougon-Macquart family is a notorious example, based as it was on the theories of such renowned doctors as Claude Bernard, Letourneau, Lucas, Morel and Moreau de Tours.<sup>26</sup> Describing the series of novels as «l'histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire», Zola proposed to study «des personnages souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, dépourvus de libre arbitre, entraînés à chaque acte par les fatalités de leur chair.»<sup>27</sup> Within this predetermined framework it would be possible to demonstrate how the diseased heredity of a single ancestor could progressively undermine the vitality of the whole family by initiating:

«la lente succession des accidents nerveux et sanguins qui se déclarent dans une race, à la suite d'une première lésion organique.»<sup>28</sup>

Tante Dide, whose nervous disorders and liaison with the drunkard Macquart are at the root of the Rougon-Macquart degeneracy, thus lives to watch her legacy of alcoholism and insanity gradually weaken the vitality of her many descendants. For although some members of the family are uncharacteristically healthy – such as Doctor Pascal and Jean Macquart – the general effect of degeneracy is cumulative and disheartening. Maxime Saccard of *La Curée* is, for example, effete and depraved, «un produit défectueux, où les défauts des parents se complétaient et s'empiraient»,<sup>29</sup> and Etienne Lantier of *Germinal* is almost unable to control the violent instincts aroused in him by alcohol, being simply:

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<sup>26</sup> A. Carter *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830-1900* (Toronto University Press, 1958) p.73

<sup>27</sup> E. Zola *Thérèse Raquin* in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1967) Vol.1 Preface, p.518

<sup>28</sup> E. Zola *La Fortune des Rougon* (Edition Critique, Genève, 1990) Preface, p.3

<sup>29</sup> E. Zola *La Curée* (Paris, Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1938) p.47

«le dernier enfant d'une race d'ivrognes, qui souffrait dans sa chair de toute cette ascendance trempée et détraquée d'alcool, au point que la moindre goutte était devenue pour lui un poison.»<sup>30</sup>

Such concepts of heredity, though presupposing a certain degree of determinism, were nonetheless common to a wide range of literary fields. Huysmans, even after having proclaimed naturalism to be a doctrine without a future, continued to remain partly within its intellectual framework. His notoriously decadent *A Rebours* opens with the placing of the degenerate Des Esseintes within his hereditary context, and Huysmans remarks that «par un singulier phénomène d'atavisme, le dernier descendant ressemblait à l'antique aïeule.»<sup>31</sup> Nine years later, Zola used almost the same words to describe the haemophiliac Charles, «d'une extraordinaire ressemblance avec sa trisaïeule, Tante Dide, la folle des Tulettes.»<sup>32</sup>

Paul Bourget, though loath to accept heredity as exemption from the responsibility of one's actions, was equally convinced of its relevance to the understanding of character, both individual and national. «On a beau vouloir recommencer la société humaine...» he wrote in *L'Etape*, «on n'échappe pas à ses hérédités.»<sup>33</sup>

He himself was particularly convinced of the need to accept and understand one's heredity, being the product of two diverse - and in many ways contradictory - tendencies. As he explains in his *Lettre Autobiographique*, his father was an academic mathematician, his mother a delicate and hypersensitive woman of German origin. Albert Feuillerat, Bourget's brother in law and personal friend, argued that it would be difficult to over-emphasise the influence on Bourget of his father's scientific

<sup>30</sup> E. Zola *Germinal* (Paris, Pocket Classiques, 1990) p.62

<sup>31</sup> J. Huysmans *A Rebours* (ed. P. Waldner) (Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1978) p.62

<sup>32</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p. 1200

<sup>33</sup> P. Bourget *L'Etape* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1911) p.209

temperament,<sup>34</sup> but Bourget himself admitted the conflict between this methodical approach, and other, more irrational tendencies:

«Il y a toujours eu en moi un philosophe et un poète teinté de germanisme en train de se débattre contre un analyste de la pure et lucide tradition latine.»<sup>35</sup>

Although Bourget's approach to heredity was precise and arguably almost medical, his attitude was perceptibly different from that of Zola. For while he examined in some detail the physical and mental consequences of heredity, he was also convinced of the moral repercussions, of an emotional and ethical heredity that Zola would doubtless have regarded with suspicion as being unscientific. «Qu'il y ait un atavisme moral, comme il y a un atavisme physique, une hérédité en retour des idées et des sentiments de nos aïeux, c'est un fait indiscutable» Bourget commented through his spokesman Victor Ferrand in *L'Etape*.<sup>36</sup> The individual might find himself burdened with the moral tendencies of his ancestors, but he was by the same law responsible for those of his descendants. Thus while Zola argued that morality was an individual concern largely dependent on milieu, Bourget maintained that it could also be traced to the cumulative moral standing of successive generations.

Both writers, however, were equally convinced that if individual and family heredity played an important part in the shaping of character, so too did the accumulated heredity of the race. As Zola demonstrates in *Germinal*, the contrast between Etienne's reactions and those of the miners can to a large extent be traced to their different regional and racial origins. Etienne, small, dark and of Provençal ancestry, is fiery and temperamental. The miners, originating from the department of

<sup>34</sup> A. Feuillerat *Paul Bourget – Histoire d'un Esprit sous la Troisième République* (Paris, Plon, 1937) p.xv

<sup>35</sup> Bourget, *Lettre Autobiographique*, p.450

<sup>36</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.22

the Nord, are habitually calm and phlegmatic, but alarmingly violent when eventually provoked:

«Tout le vieux sang flamand était là, lourd et placide, mettant des mois à s'échauffer, se jetant aux sauvageries abominables, sans rien entendre, jusqu'à ce que la bête fût soule d'atrocités. Dans son Midi, les foules flambaient plus vite.»<sup>37</sup>

Starting from the same principle that races and regions have their own inescapable characteristics, Bourget takes the argument further still, and explains the current catastrophe facing the French nation in terms of a dangerous and disconcerting mingling of different races. Fundamentally, each region has its own atavistic qualities, refined over successive centuries, and these should be understood and respected. In *Le Démon de Midi*, where this concept of regional identity is given particular attention, Bourget portrays Abbé Lartigue of the Auvergne as «robuste et râblé, (qui) portait sur sa nuque musculeuse la tête carrée des aborigènes du Plateau Central.»<sup>38</sup> Dom Beyle demonstrates in contrast a very northern reserve and asceticism;

«Il y a un demi-méridional dans tout Auvergnat, et un demi-Anglais, au contraire, dans tout Normand.»<sup>39</sup>

Racial affinities are as clear as regional ones: the French, for example, still demonstrate that lucidity of analysis characteristic of «l'esprit latin, legs suprême de la vaste organisation romaine.»<sup>40</sup> The *esprit germanique* is seen conversely as being very different in nature, and when describing the German governess in *Un Divorce*, Bourget seems clearly to subscribe to contemporary racial stereotypes:

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<sup>37</sup> Zola, *Germinal*, p.377

<sup>38</sup> P. Bourget *Le Démon de Midi* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1914) Vol.1 p.2

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.7

<sup>40</sup> P. Bourget *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Plon, 1899) p.464

«la lourde tête carrée, les cheveux d'un blond pâle, les prunelles bleues, le regard patient accusaient l'origine germanique.»<sup>41</sup>

Zola, too, would have seen the logic in such descriptions, but Bourget is more extreme in that his identification of such strong racial and regional differences is accompanied by an almost Barrésian narrow-mindedness with regard to racial amalgamation. Although fascinated by cosmopolitanism in his early and more bohemian days, Bourget rapidly came to believe that it was harmful to the nation as a whole, exacerbating the degeneration of the French race. The intermingling of races, or the incessant movement of families from one region to another, would result only in restless and uprooted individuals, unable to achieve their full potential:

«Il se fait depuis cent ans des mélanges de province à province et de race à race qui ont chargé notre sang, à tous, d'hérédités trop contradictoires.»<sup>42</sup>

This idea of *déracinement* is intricately linked to his own unhappy experiences: baptised in Amiens and educated in Strasbourg, he lived for a time in Clermont before finally finishing his education in Paris.<sup>43</sup> Such constant uprooting he blamed on the administrative system, which gave teachers such as his father little choice in the location of their posts. Here, indeed, is yet another instance of how Bourget's ideology was often defined in reaction to his own personal experiences.

However important the influence of individual and racial heredity might be, both Bourget and Zola argued that it could not be fully understood without some reference to milieu and personal circumstances. As has already been indicated, the notion of milieu in literature is often linked to determinism<sup>44</sup> – which seems particularly true in the case of Zola, although it is a hypothesis that has only recently

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<sup>41</sup> P. Bourget *Un Divorce* (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1911) p.404

<sup>42</sup> P. Bourget *Le Disciple* (Edition Définitive, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1901) p.81

<sup>43</sup> Bourget, *Lettre Autobiographique*, p.450

<sup>44</sup> Citti, *Contre la Décadence*, p.28

become generally accepted. Jean Fréville echoed a widely felt sentiment when he accused Zola of blaming the workers of *L'Assommoir* for their own pitiful condition,<sup>45</sup> but as Colette Becker persuasively argues, the framework within which *L'Assommoir* is written is far more deterministic than Fréville allows. There is a sense of the inevitable triumph of degeneration, given that the workers are trapped in a situation beyond their control.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, when writing to Francis Magnard in 1885 about his portrayal of the miners in *Germinal*, Zola commented that:

«Je n'ai eu qu'un désir, les montrer tels que notre société les a faits.»<sup>47</sup>

It is only within this deterministic vision of milieu that Zola's overall purpose makes sense – since degeneration is so closely reliant on the unhealthy influence of one's surroundings, then improving working conditions will inevitably also improve the physical and moral condition of the workers.

Physically, indeed, the consequences of an unfavourable milieu are often self-evident, the miners in *Germinal* being permanently marked by their labour in the mine:

«le grand-père toussait, crachant noir, repris de rhumatismes qui se tournaient en hydropisie, le père asthmatique, les genoux enflés d'eau, la mère et les petits travaillés de la scrofule et de l'anémie héréditaire.»<sup>48</sup>

But the psychological and moral effects of the milieu are equally undeniable, and it is on these grounds that Zola to some extent exonerates the workers from full responsibility for their actions. His articles on prostitution in *Une Campagne* are one such example. In «La fille au théâtre» Zola describes how the corruption of working class women by their milieu is often reciprocal: «le milieu fait la fille qui, plus tard,

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in C. Becker «La condition ouvrière dans *L'Assommoir*: un inéluctable enlèvement» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.52 (1978) p.42

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.42

<sup>47</sup> *Lettre à Francis Magnard*, 4 April 1885 in E. Zola, *Correspondance* (Paris, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1985) Vol.5 (1884-6) p.254

<sup>48</sup> Zola, *Germinal*, p.278

par une action réflexe, gâte le milieu.»<sup>49</sup> And he gives a perceptive and sympathetic account of how this corruption takes place irrespective of the intentions of such girls or their parents, «corrompues par le sol de Paris pour la débauche de Paris.»<sup>50</sup> Paris is of course portrayed as the most contaminated and demoralising milieu of all, whether for the workers who suffer from claustrophobic and unhealthy conditions, or for the more wealthy classes, led astray by the temptations of luxury and dissipation:

«cette folie de jouissance qui devrait jeter la patrie au cabanon des nations pourries et déshonorées.»<sup>51</sup>

Paul Bourget, though generally more concerned with the upper classes than with the workers, is equally convinced of the potentially corrupting influence of the capital, claiming that the face of almost every Parisian betrays «la trace évidente d'un sang appauvri, d'une énergie musculaire diminuée, d'un nervosisme exagéré.»<sup>52</sup> Such a view was far from unusual among writers and critics, and was a common feature of the debate on decadence: Max Nordau wrote in 1892 that «avec la croissance des grandes villes s'augmente parallèlement le nombre des dégénérés de toute espèce.»<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Bourget argued that those already destabilised by hereditary disorders could find in this anonymous metropolis every opportunity to be transformed into aesthetic but ineffectual dilettantes, resulting in the dangerous dissipation of the vital health of the nation.<sup>54</sup> As can be seen, Bourget is concerned above all with the intellectual and spiritual corruption of the capital, with the overwhelmingly eclectic nature of thoughts, styles and experiences.

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<sup>49</sup> E. Zola *Une Campagne* in *Oeuvres Complètes* Vol.14 p.517

<sup>50</sup> Zola «Comment elles poussent» in *Une Campagne*, p.525

<sup>51</sup> Zola, *La Curée*, p.68

<sup>52</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.118

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Carter, *The Idea of Decadence*, p.69

<sup>54</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.43



«Tout ici n'est-il pas multiple? Tout ne vous invite-t-il pas à faire de votre âme une mosaïque des sensations compliquées?»<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, it is this refinement which is at once the most characteristic and also the most dangerous element of a decadent civilisation – characteristic because a degenerate nation directs its attentions towards introspection and analysis, dangerous because the resulting lethargy and inaction leads to potentially irreparable sterility.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Zola, however, Bourget maintains that whatever the temptation such a corrupting milieu may offer, the individual always has the choice and the willpower to resist. He ridicules the determinist vision in his picture of Joseph Monneron, who refuses to accept that his son can be a counterfeit agent on the grounds that he has not been the victim of a criminal milieu.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, he writes in his study of Flaubert that he was a man profoundly in discord with his intellectual and social milieu, and thus able easily to resist its influence.<sup>58</sup>

If Zola and Bourget analyse degeneration within a largely similar intellectual framework of heredity, race and milieu, they also share important ideas regarding national renewal. The family, already a significant area of consensus between Catholics and Republicans, became for both writers the essential context within which degeneracy could be studied and potentially cured, relating in a wider domain to the cult of regionalism and energy that became increasingly influential in the 1890s.

Zola's interest in the family dominated his life's work, featuring in his journalism of the early 1880s, as well as in the *Rougon-Macquart* series, the *Trois Villes* and the *Quatre Evangiles*. Increasingly, he came to represent the family not only as a centre of order and stability, but also as part of a greater work of creation and

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<sup>55</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.49

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.43

<sup>57</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.134

<sup>58</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.107

evolution, the hope of inevitable renewal for a degenerate nation. Initially, his views may appear unorthodox: Brian Nelson argues for a cynical presentation of marriage in such novels as *La Curée*, where Renée is sold to Aristide Saccard as an economic bargain - and in *Le Docteur Pascal* Christian marriage is rejected in favour of Pascal's incestuous union with his niece Clotilde.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the ideal community envisaged in *Travail* is one in which marriage is abolished entirely.<sup>60</sup> Yet as Nelson also argues, the type of *union libre* that Zola proposes as a replacement is a marriage in all but name, demanding the same level of commitment, responsibility and exclusivity. Equally, although Zola recognises the theoretical justice of the legalisation of divorce, he is not convinced that it will make existing unions any more harmonious, and comments sceptically in *Le Figaro* that «je doute fort que le bonheur de l'espèce en soit augmenté le moins du monde.»<sup>61</sup> F. Naudin-Patriat has demonstrated the dominance of the legitimate family in the *Rougon-Macquart* series as a whole, at least among the bourgeoisie,<sup>62</sup> and certainly Zola makes overt condemnation of adultery in his journalism, even while recognising the degree to which it can be traced to milieu and upbringing:

«Qu'elles tombent par bêtise, par besoin de luxe, ou par détraquement nerveux, elles n'en sont pas moins un ferment de corruption dans la société.»<sup>63</sup>

Zola's ideal couple is honest and industrious, united by common interests and material concerns, and a true partnership is envisaged where «la femme vivait étroitement la vie du mari.»<sup>64</sup> Having said this, however, it is debatable whether or not

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<sup>59</sup> B. Nelson *Zola and the Bourgeoisie* (London, Macmillan, 1983) p.54

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55

<sup>61</sup> Zola, «Le divorce et la littérature» in *Une Campagne*, p.543

<sup>62</sup> F. Naudin-Patriat «Les classes laborieuses face à l'institution du mariage dans les *Rougon-Macquart*» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.50 (1976) p.193

<sup>63</sup> Zola, «L'adultère dans la bourgeoisie» in *Une Campagne*, p.537

<sup>64</sup> Zola, «Femmes honnêtes» in *Une Campagne*, p.542

Zola's vision of the ideal family is anything but patriarchal. Chantal Jennings sees Zola's attitude as highly contradictory, but argues nonetheless that his sympathy for the sufferings of oppressed women demonstrates undeniable feminist tendencies.<sup>65</sup> This is not entirely convincing. Zola's sympathy for the oppressed is certainly characteristic of his writing, but seems to coexist with a fairly uniform patriarchal vision. As Brian Nelson argues, his ideal women are those who recognise their social, maternal and domestic responsibilities,<sup>66</sup> and in *Le Docteur Pascal*, the most autobiographical of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels, the obedient Martine and Clotilde circle adoringly around Pascal like planets round the sun. Clotilde, modelled closely on Zola's own mistress Jeanne Rozerat, adapts herself to the role of «une esclave heureuse»<sup>67</sup> and almost deifies her uncle:

«Que ta volonté soit faite, tu es mon maître et je t'obéis.»<sup>68</sup>

Equally necessary to the restorative importance of the family is its central role in the revitalisation of the population. Zola was adamant in his belief that love must be fertile – Clotilde reflects in *Le Docteur Pascal* that «tout amour qui n'avait pas l'enfant pour but, lui semblait inutile et vilain»<sup>69</sup> - and this belief reaches almost ridiculous proportions in *Fécondité*, where all who are insufficiently fertile are condemned to perish. As David Baguley points out, however, this blatant propaganda must be seen within the context of the *Alliance Nationale pour l'Accroissement de la Population Française*, of which Zola was one of the first secretaries, and whose plan of campaign

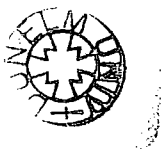
<sup>65</sup> C. Jennings «Zola féministe?» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.44 (1972) p.178

<sup>66</sup> Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie*, p.54

<sup>67</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p.1266

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1350

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1296



met with his full approval.<sup>70</sup> The family, he believed, was the guarantee that the work of creation and renewal would continue indefinitely:

«Les familles sont l'éternel devenir. Elles plongent, au-delà de l'ancêtre commun, à travers les couches insondables des races qui ont vécu, jusqu'au premier être; et elles pousseront sans fin.»<sup>71</sup>

Paul Bourget was less concerned than Zola to promote fertility as a virtue in itself, but he was certainly persuaded of the vital importance of the family in providing order, structure and hierarchy. Like Zola, he argued that the family - and not the individual - represented the smallest social unit, even suggesting the possibility of a family vote,<sup>72</sup> and he believed that the root of many national troubles and disorders could be traced to an attack on the role of the family within society.<sup>73</sup> It was this attitude that dictated his condemnatory stance towards divorce and adultery, both seen as being essentially selfish and irresponsible, especially where children were involved. As the unbending Père Euvrard comments in *Un Divorce*:

«Ce mariage est le plus fort agent de cette fixité de mœurs, en dehors de laquelle tout n'est qu'anarchie et fièvre éternelle.»<sup>74</sup>

Bourget further assures the reader - by means of detailed footnotes - that in all countries where divorce is legal, the number of criminals, lunatics and suicides is ten times greater in those families affected, and he makes reference to the extensive research carried out on the subject by the positivist Enrico Morseli.<sup>75</sup> Bourget reinforces his point by demonstrating a strikingly clear link between the sufferings of

<sup>70</sup> D. Baguley «Du récit polémique au discours utopique: l'Évangile républicain selon Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.110

<sup>71</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p.1242

<sup>72</sup> C. Baussan *De Frédéric Le Play à Paul Bourget* (Paris, Flammarion, 1935) p.200

<sup>73</sup> J. Demoulin *La Famille Française dans l'Oeuvre de Paul Bourget* (Thèse, Université de Fribourg, Suisse, Editions Xavier Mappus-Le-Puy, 1939) p.12

<sup>74</sup> P. Bourget *Un Divorce* (Paris, Plon, 1911) p.386

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.386

the central characters and the divorce of Gabrielle Darras – small wonder that Charles Martel criticised the work in *L'Aurore* as being overly judgemental.<sup>76</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the Naquet Divorce Law of 1884 was one of the most controversial of Third Republican social policies, and was passed only after eight years of intense lobbying, with considerable modification to Naquet's original demands. Although Naquet portrayed divorce as being fundamental to individual liberty and to the Republican cause, many moderate and conservative Republicans shared Bourget's opinion that divorce merely exacerbated the crisis of the family.<sup>77</sup>

Certainly both Zola and Bourget saw the family as participating in a much greater work of creation and renewal, and believed that for this reason the individual should submit his own desires to the lasting health of the nation. For a family to flourish, it must be able to rely on the accumulated efforts of successive generations within a specific regional context. Zola's ideology is more cosmic, Bourget's more closely related to the mystical nationalism of Maurice Barrès and his disciples, yet both demonstrate the evidence of new intellectual trends, not only the cult of regionalism, but also the emphasis on energy and vitality.

The cult of regionalism – or in Zola's case the cult of the earth and of nature – is particularly striking. In his early works, Zola was considerably influenced by Letourneau's theories of reductionism,<sup>78</sup> and was concerned to deny any metaphysical element in humankind by completely defining man as a product of nature. As he wrote to Jules Lemaître on 14 March 1885, in defence of his extensive portrayal of basic instincts:

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<sup>76</sup> *L'Aurore*, 29 January 1908 (Colindale Library Microfiches M.F. 153)

<sup>77</sup> T. McBride "Divorce and the Republican Family" in E. Accampo, R. Fuchs and M. Stewart (Eds.) *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France* (London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) pp.59-81

<sup>78</sup> P. Walker "*Germinal*" and Zola's *Philosophical and Religious Thought* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1984) p.5

«Vous mettez l'homme dans le cerveau, je le mets dans tous ses organes. Vous isolez l'homme de la nature, je ne le vois pas sans la terre, d'où il sort et où il rentre.»<sup>79</sup>

This identification of man with his natural surroundings is developed in some detail in *Germinal*, where despite representing the claustrophobic setting of the mine, the earth also symbolises the fermentation of ideas and the eternal fertility of nature.

Colin Smethurst relates this cult of the earth to the wider idea of a cosmic struggle within Zola's works,<sup>80</sup> which is certainly a perceptive comment. But it is also noticeable that Zola's perspective changes over the course of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, and by the time he comes to write *Le Docteur Pascal* in 1893, he is no longer intent on proving any theory of reductionism. Rather than reducing man to a purely natural and fully comprehensible phenomenon, he is fascinated by the mystery of life and creation, and believes that man should ally himself to nature and its evolution if he wants to achieve his full potential. Thus the relationship between man and the earth becomes less material and more of a spiritual affinity, a tangible harmony with:

«la terre grande, qui seule demeure immortelle, la mère d'où on sort et où l'on retourne, elle qu'on aime jusqu'au crime, qui refait continuellement de la vie pour son but ignoré...»<sup>81</sup>

Pascal, Zola's own voice in the novel, is reassured to find that Jean Macquart has returned to work on the land, surrounded by his ever increasing family, and sees in this development some hope for the renewal of the Rougon-Macquart dynasty:

«(il) semblait apporter le renouveau, la sève jeune des races qui vont se retremper dans la terre.»<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Zola, *Lettre à Jules Lemaitre* in *Correspondance*, Vol.5 (1884-6) p.245

<sup>80</sup> C. Smethurst *Emile Zola – "Germinal"* (London, Arnold, 1974) p.43

<sup>81</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p.1239

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1242

A. E. Carter argues that Zola's evolution from scientism to primitivism is characteristic of the intellectual trends of the *fin de siècle*, being a necessary reaction to the idea of decadence.<sup>83</sup> Certainly, although the growing interest in regionalism is now identified with early fascism, it was in fact shared by both Left and Right. The Republican Journal *Le National* had long been a defender of federalism, and in 1900 carried out a survey on decentralisation prior to the first meeting of the *Fédération Régionaliste Française* later in the same year.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, Taine, Barrès and Bourget were equally keen to see the revival of regionalism: Bourget suggested that increased funding should be given to regional colleges,<sup>85</sup> and argued in his *Essais* that the solution to degeneration would be:

«le réchauffement, la résurrection de ces énergies qui ne sont pas mortes, mais qui sommeillent: nos vieilles provinces françaises.»<sup>86</sup>

The logic behind Bourget's ideology is self-evident – just as he believes racial degeneration to result from excessive refinement, from the cosmopolitanism of Parisian life and from the cult of the individual, so therefore does he believe that renewal will spring from a return to simple and submissive existence, rooted in regionalism, the cult of the earth and of one's ancestors:

«Je demeure persuadé que rien ne vaut pour assurer une saine hygiène à l'esprit que le grandissement presque végétatif de la plante qui, ne changeant jamais ni son ciel ni son milieu, ramasse en elle toutes les énergies secrètes d'un seul coin de sol.»<sup>87</sup>

It is indeed scarcely surprising that Charles Maurras should criticise Bourget

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<sup>83</sup> Carter, *The Idea of Decadence*, p.78

<sup>84</sup> Citti, *Contre la Décadence*, p.251

<sup>85</sup> C. Garret *Paul Bourget and the Politics of Traditionalism* (Los Angeles, 1993) p.158

<sup>86</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.206

<sup>87</sup> Bourget, *Lettre Autobiographique*, p.450

for the excessive narrowness of his national and ethnic sympathies.<sup>88</sup> For Bourget's arguments begin to demonstrate ever closer parallels with Maurice Barrès' cult of «la terre et les morts», also a conscious reaction to decadence. Jean Monneron, for example, ends Bourget's novel *L'Etape* with the ardent proclamation « Je veux me replonger dans la plus profonde France. Je ne peux plus vivre sans mes morts »<sup>89</sup> - where the similarity to Barrès is implicit. Barrès believed that it was possible to regenerate dormant energies within himself by recognising his psychic link with his ancestors and by participating in a cult on their behalf, thus transcending the limits of his own existence.<sup>90</sup> This much Bourget would certainly have accepted. Where the two writers differed was in the resulting action envisaged – for Barrès was strongly anti-intellectual, believed in sacrificing individuals for the sake of national unity, and favoured violence in politics as a means of directing man's basic instincts against decadence.<sup>91</sup> This glorification of violence – which relates Barrésian thought very closely to later fascism – is entirely absent from Bourget's ideology, although he does encourage decisive action and energy as a means of conquering decadence.

What in fact are the respective hopes of Zola and Bourget for the regeneration of the French nation? Certainly their early works would seem to give little cause for optimism, but how have their perspectives changed by the 1890s?

Jules Lemaître once commented that Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* series was nothing more than «une épopée pessimiste de l'animalité humaine»<sup>92</sup> and the earlier novels in the series give some justification for this assessment, the various characters motivated only by their most basic desires, and trapped within their doomed heredity.

<sup>88</sup> C. Maurras *Triptyque de Paul Bourget 1895 – 1900 – 1923* (Paris, Librairie de la Revue Française, 1931) p.42

<sup>89</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.358

<sup>90</sup> R. Soucy "Barrès and Fascism" in *French Historical Studies* no.5 (Spring 1967) p.75

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in C. Becker «*Germinal*»: *Etudes Littéraires* (Paris, PUF, 1984) p.83



But Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal* is an important turning point in his thought, a prelude to the utopian visions of his final *Evangelies*. Here, even the initially rigid structure of heredity, race and milieu begins to give way to a more ambiguous and three-dimensional picture, as Zola appears to doubt the all-encompassing power of science, and the human right to intervene in the progress of nature. Despite scientific advancement, Zola suspects that the whole question of heredity remains «obscur, vaste et insondable, comme toutes les sciences balbutiantes encore, où l'imagination est maîtresse.»<sup>93</sup> This explicit denial of reductionism is accompanied by an unashamed fascination with the very mystery that lies at the centre of life and creation. If degeneration was once inescapable, now it is the renewal of the race which has become inevitable, and like Pascal, Zola appears to be affirming that «l'espoir est là, dans la reconstitution journalière de la race par le sang nouveau qui vient du dehors.»<sup>94</sup>

Bourget was likewise accused of pessimism, not least by Ernest Seillière, who criticised his tendency to revel in aesthetic decadence and his inability to suggest a means of national renewal.<sup>95</sup> Bourget's *Essais* certainly render him guilty of the former complaint, but it would be difficult to deny that by the 1890s, he too had become fully devoted to the task of working for national renewal. Both Zola and Bourget argued that, for regeneration to be fruitful, the individual must become to a certain extent self-effacing, recognising his contribution within a family context to a vast, evolutionary work of creation. Just as Zola was convinced that man could achieve his full potential when in harmony with his natural surroundings, so too was Bourget inspired by the concept of deriving energy and life by returning to a simple and regional existence. But as he had stressed individual choice in decadence, so did he also emphasise the

<sup>93</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p.1186

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.1242

<sup>95</sup> E. Seillière *Paul Bourget, Psychologue et Sociologue* (Paris, Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1937) p.23

conscious effort of «l'amour et la volonté»<sup>96</sup> that was required to revitalise a diffident nation. More pessimistic by nature than Zola, he was nonetheless convinced of «l'optimisme héréditaire» of the French race,<sup>97</sup> and believed firmly in the potential and means for national regeneration, even if he sometimes doubted its achievement. And thus both writers moved progressively from a fatalistic vision of racial decline to a recognition of potential energy, vitality, and national renewal, determined to echo the words of Zola's Dr Pascal:

«Je crois au triomphe final de la vie.»<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Bourget, *Le Disciple*, Preface p.ix

<sup>97</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, p.11

<sup>98</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p.1190

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### ***Faith in the Future? The Church and Decadence***

“It is easy to set great forces, especially religious forces and prejudices, in motion. The difficulty is to stop them at will.”<sup>1</sup>

The degree of consensus that Paul Bourget and Emile Zola demonstrated in their analysis of national decadence was often surprisingly high. Politically and socially, their fears of decline and disorder shared many important characteristics, and to their common concern over racial degeneration, they proposed solutions clearly inspired by a similar intellectual climate. But there was one question – fundamental to the understanding of their respective significance – over which they remained eternally opposed: the question of religion. Quite simply, Bourget respected the Church as being a solution to decadence; Zola condemned it as being decadence itself. Bourget came to see his duty as being the promotion of Catholic thought and action in an individual, social and national context; Zola’s mission was increasingly to undermine the Church’s influence in every sphere. But was the situation as clear-cut as it might at first appear? How intense and irreconcilable actually was their opposition? Did it conceal any underlying ambiguity? How in fact does their conflict in the religious domain reflect on their consensus in other areas, and what is its wider significance?

If the question of religion is the most divisive issue between Bourget and Zola - as between Catholics and Republicans in general - it is also the most difficult to assess objectively. It is a subject that inevitably arouses strong emotions among believers and non-believers alike, and which in this period of particularly intense conflict gave rise

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<sup>1</sup> Abbot Gasquet “The religious troubles in France” in The Catholic Truth Society, *The Crisis in the Church in France* (London, 1905) p.21

to myths and propaganda on both sides. The image of absolute and irreconcilable conflict between Catholics and Republicans was one such myth – a meaningful myth that was widely propagated and heavily over-subscribed to, but not necessarily as complete as has been suggested. Certainly the differences between the two sides were both considerable and bitterly perceived as such, and Zola and Bourget are representative examples of the opposing sides. But beneath the initial and most striking opposition lay many levels of division, rendering the reality far more complex and three dimensional than might at first appear. More fundamental still, the similarity of approach that has already been observed between Zola and Bourget was often no less evident in the domain of religion than it was in other areas. Paradoxically, it was because they were so similar that they were likewise so opposed – and if their philosophies were incompatible, was it not because both sought to resolve the same insoluble questions?

This paradox is at the heart of current historiographical debate on the subject. Theodore Zeldin argues that the real problem between Catholics and Republicans was “a crisis of communication”<sup>2</sup> – rightly underlining that the bitterness characterising religious conflict was often out of proportion to the differences involved. On a deeper level, the mentalities of the opposing camps could be remarkably similar – as is clearly demonstrated by the comparison between Emile Zola and Paul Bourget in domains other than the religious one. But Zeldin also argues that beneath the violent accusations, the divide between Catholic and Republicans - even concerning religion – was far less wide than they in fact imagined, and could have been further decreased by more effective communication. This emphasis has been strongly criticised by other

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<sup>2</sup> T. Zeldin *France 1848-1945* (Oxford, OUP, 1980) Volume II *Intellect, Taste and Anxiety* p.983

historians – notably Ralph Gibson and René Rémond<sup>3</sup> – as being exaggerated revisionism, incompatible with the basic and irreconcilable conflict between the two sides. And these critics have a valid point. It seems unlikely that more forthright communication would have lessened the gap between fanatical Catholics and Republicans – for their ideologies were too similar in purpose to be compatible. Yet in a sense it was precisely because of the similarity in mentality underlined by Zeldin that their opposition was so unambiguous in this area, even though not in others. As Ralph Gibson points out, here were two philosophies so powerful in their significance that they can both be considered religions – and René Rémond describes anti-clericalism as «une idéologie politique positive.»<sup>4</sup> Fervent beliefs on each side could be accompanied by an equally fervent intolerance, and incompatibility could mask paradoxical parallels.

Emile Zola and Paul Bourget span one of the most troubled periods of Catholic and anti-clerical controversy, and together provide an invaluable insight into both opposition and ambiguity. The weight of a long historical tradition of conflict lay heavily on the early Third Republic, and the last quarter of the century witnessed the constant resurgence of bitter controversy, and demonstrated both the strength and also the wilful exaggeration of opposition. As Zeldin comments, there was far more active disbelief in Third Republican France than in either England or America,<sup>5</sup> and France was the European country where religious observance declined the most.<sup>6</sup> The legacy of the Revolution, both the myth of a Republican ideal and also the violent campaign against the Church in the 1790s, was not so easily forgotten, and to a certain extent

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<sup>3</sup> R. Gibson "Republicans versus Catholics in the late nineteenth century" in F. Tallet and N. Atkin (Eds.) *Religion, Society and Politics in France since 1789* (London, Hambledon, 1991) p.109

<sup>4</sup> Tallet and Atkin, *Religion, Society and Politics*, p.107

<sup>5</sup> Zeldin, *France 1848-1945* (Vol. II) p.1027

<sup>6</sup> J. McManners *Church and State in France 1870-1914* (London, SPCK, 1972) Introduction p. vii

past quarrels dictated contemporary misunderstandings.<sup>7</sup> Thus in 1870 the Church was automatically – as well as justifiably – associated with the forces of reaction, as well as distrusted for its support of the fallen Empire. Despite a period of relative calm between Church and State during the government of Moral Order, the residual suspicion resurfaced after the Republican victory of 1876, and was clearly reflected in the increasingly anti-clerical measures of the 1880s. Even the *Ralliement* – Leo XIII's diplomatic attempt to reconcile Catholics with the Republic – was treated with caution as potential means towards a Catholic *coup*,<sup>8</sup> and when the Dreyfus affair broke out in 1898, it was clear that opposing antipathies were only just below the surface.<sup>9</sup> The affair became, as Paul Bourget remarked in 1902, «(une) funeste guerre civile à laquelle une retentissante affaire judiciaire servit de prétexte plus que de cause.»<sup>10</sup>

The Catholic-Republican divide was thus inescapable, further reinforced by the aggressive presentation of the Church as an outmoded institution obsessed with power and domination, and by the Church's defensive response. And it was particularly clear in the reactions of Zola and Bourget to the question of the Church and decadence.

Zola was an anti-clerical highly characteristic of his time. Brought up by a Catholic mother and in a Catholic school, his increasing allegiance to scientism and positivism led him to reject the faith of his youth, and to campaign ever more vigorously for the suppression of any form of religion in public life. If France was a decadent nation, then the Church was largely responsible for this situation, even though the decadence itself could – and did – take other forms. For as far as Zola was concerned, Catholicism was a stumbling block, a force against democracy, progress,

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<sup>7</sup> McManners, *Church and State*, p.13

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74

<sup>9</sup> N. Ravitch *The Catholic Church and the French Nation 1589-1989* (London, Routledge, 1990) p.98

<sup>10</sup> P. Bourget *L'Etape* (Paris, Plon, 1911) p.13

Science and even life itself, and which must be destroyed if France were to survive. As he wrote in his announcement of his final novel, *Vérité*:

«L'Eglise est la puissance mauvaise, anti-sociale, stagnante et corruptrice, qu'il faut abattre.»<sup>11</sup>

His antipathy to the Church, which initially surfaced in his articles against the Empire in the late 1860s, thus runs clearly through his *Rougon-Macquart* series to become one of the guiding forces of his later works.

In political terms, Zola subscribed to the prevalent anti-clerical view that the Church was completely irreconcilable with democratic progress. His novel *Rome*, published in 1896 as the second of his *Trois Villes* trilogy, presents a stereotypical picture of the Church as a defensive anachronism, unable either to admit defeat or to respond to the challenges of the age. The plot is unsurprising: Pierre Froment, a priest whose faith in the Church has already been undermined by the excesses and commercialism of Lourdes, arrives in Rome to defend his recently published book, an attempt to reconcile contemporary Catholicism with progressive democracy. His desire to regenerate the Church is constantly frustrated by the complex machinations of the Roman clergy, and he leaves Rome at the end of the novel having transferred his naïve idealism to a new faith in experimental science. The novel is not one of Zola's more incisive works; the style is laboured and convoluted, and the central character transparently a vehicle for Zola's own political and religious criticism. Equally, the presentation of the Catholic clergy is uniformly unflattering and two-dimensional, although Zola does admit of some distinction between rural priests and the smug papal supporters among the Roman clergy.<sup>12</sup> But it is for these very reasons that the novel

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<sup>11</sup> E. Zola, quoted in D. Baguley, «Du récit polémique au discours utopique: l'Évangile républicain selon Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no. 54 (1980) p.112

<sup>12</sup> E. Zola *Rome* in *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris, Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1967) Vol.7 p.583

gives such an important insight into anti-clerical attitudes and assumptions. Pierre Aubéry has argued that Zola here presents Catholicism as being «une police qui assure le triomphe des puissants et des jouissances»<sup>13</sup> - and the comment is not without justification. Christianity, as Zola sees it, is a failed attempt at democracy – for the initial and laudable endeavour to convince the poor of their equality disappeared all too swiftly once the Church became allied to State power, and the consequent history has been one of ruthless domination.<sup>14</sup> The primacy of Rome lends itself all too easily to Zola's hypothesis – constantly reiterated throughout the novel – that the *raison d'être* of Catholicism is no less political than religious, the mere extension of the imperial instinct rooted in Roman history:

«Au fond, il n'y a là que l'esprit de conquête, l'ambition fière de la race, toujours en peine de la domination du monde.»<sup>15</sup>

Following from this assumption, the Pope and the clergy are nothing but a sophisticated and impenetrable conspiracy to control men's minds and souls – «ce labyrinthe sans fin des influences et des intrigues»<sup>16</sup> - offering little practical or charitable benefit. Pope Leo XIII, for all his intelligence and diplomacy, is but «un dictateur nommé à vie»<sup>17</sup> dangerously idolised by the masses - and Zola claims to await with eagerness the schism that the Papacy is so desperate to avoid. On a lower level, the Catholic priesthood in France is presented as being equally superfluous to the needs of its citizens – most controversially in *Germinal*, where abbés Joire and Ranvier are of little practical help to the suffering miners. Pierre Ouvrard argues that Zola's attitude here is somewhat ambiguous, and that his knowledge is inadequate to permit

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<sup>13</sup> P. Aubéry «Imitations de Jésus chez Zola: *Germinal*» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.53 (1979) p.43

<sup>14</sup> Zola, *Rome*, p.530

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.654

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.819

<sup>17</sup> E. Zola «L'opportunisme de Léon XIII» in *Une Nouvelle Campagne (Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. 14)* p.705



comment on the priesthood.<sup>18</sup> But Zola's comments on the Church do not seem to be elsewhere restricted by this lack of inside information, and as Ouvrard admits, he does offer in *Germinal* a clear critique of the inadequacy of Catholic socialism in his description of abbé Ranvier:

«les mains vides au travers de cette armée mourante de faim.»<sup>19</sup>

The Church, then, is presented as a dangerous political and social anachronism, intent only on domination, and superfluous to the needs of the nation. Furthermore, just as obstructive as its hindrance of political progress is its condemnation of intellectual discovery – a condemnation that Zola feels particularly keenly. In a study of Bourget's *Cosmopolis* – an important inspiration for his own novel *Rome* – Zola expresses his concern that Bourget should follow Balzac in believing that intelligence can only develop within the context of religion.<sup>20</sup> Religion and Science are, throughout Zola's work, portrayed as being largely incompatible – in *Rome*, Pierre Froment is advised by Cardinal Boccanera not to write anything at all for fear of heresy,<sup>21</sup> and Zola emphasises the Church's repressive orthodoxy by listing every variety of book condemned by the Index.<sup>22</sup> This institutional intolerance is, he argues, frequently paralleled by individual narrow-mindedness. In *Le Docteur Pascal*, Zola portrays the servant Martine as «enfonceée dans les croyances d'une religion étroite»<sup>23</sup> - unable to see the value of Pascal's naturalist investigations because of her restrictive faith; and her violent destruction of the doctor's accumulated research at the end of the novel is described as:

<sup>18</sup> P. Ouvrard «A propos de *Germinal* (1884) : Zola et le socialisme catholique» in *La Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* (May-June 1985) no.3 p.430

<sup>19</sup> E. Zola *Germinal* (Pocket Classiques, 1990) p.413

<sup>20</sup> E. Zola «Chronique – Paul Bourget» in *Mélanges Critiques (Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. 12)* p.674

<sup>21</sup> Zola, *Rome*, p.581

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.794

<sup>23</sup> E. Zola *Le Docteur Pascal* (Oeuvres Complètes, Vol.7) p.1381

«le martyre d'un saint, la pensée écrite brûlée en place publique, tout un monde de vérité et d'espérance détruite.»<sup>24</sup>

Despite doubts about the limitations of Science, Zola was convinced of its fundamental role in the creation of utopia<sup>25</sup> – and it was with this perspective in mind that Zola devoted himself to a lifelong anticlerical campaign against illusion, intolerance and clerical education. As early as the 1870s, he condemned the growing interest in the miraculous as destined to alienate from the Church its more rational and intelligent supporters, and commented sarcastically that he himself awaited the age of the “practical” miracle:

«Je comprends un miracle qui créerait, en un jour, une ligne ferrée, qui percerait un tunnel, qui ferait quelque découverte utile...»<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, Zola condemned Protestantism and Catholicism as being equally “unscientific” in their approach,<sup>27</sup> and concluded that all religions would ultimately defer to the supremacy of Science:

«On dit: la religion est éternelle: mais, certes, la science est éternelle et plus encore.»<sup>28</sup>

The fundamental association of the Church with decadence resulted, however, from the Catholic opposition to life itself. Brian Nelson argues that Zola had little sympathy for the Christian ideal of chastity<sup>29</sup> – and certainly in *Rome* he describes celibacy as «toute une protestation contre l'éternelle matière, les forces de la nature, la

<sup>24</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, p.1386

<sup>25</sup> E. Cosset *Les Quatre Evangiles d'Emile Zola – Espace, Temps, Personnages* (Genève, Librairie Droz, 1990) p.53

<sup>26</sup> E. Zola «Les guérisons miraculeuses» (*La Cloche*, 6 June 1872) in *Lettres Parisiennes (Oeuvres Complètes Vol. 14)* p.77

<sup>27</sup> Zola «Le Protestantisme» in *Une Campagne (Oeuvres Complètes Vol.12)* p.597

<sup>28</sup> Zola, «La science et le catholicisme» in *Nouvelle Campagne* p.838

<sup>29</sup> B. Nelson *Zola and the Bourgeoisie* (London, Macmillan, 1983) p.57

fécondité sans fin de la vie.»<sup>30</sup> As both Michael Maione<sup>31</sup> and Auguste Dezalay<sup>32</sup> have argued, Zola was keen to emphasise the link between Rome and decadence, and in his novel he traces the increasing dissipation of energy that results even from Pierre's temporary stay in the city. Nor was he alone in making this association, which must be seen in the context of other contemporary works, not least Paul Bourget's *Cosmopolis*.<sup>33</sup> But unlike Bourget, Zola remained convinced that Rome itself could never be a source of regeneration, being nothing more than «une terre épuisée, de laquelle ne pousserait jamais plus que cette papauté despotique, maîtresse des corps ainsi qu'elle était maîtresse des âmes.»<sup>34</sup>

Paul Bourget's vision of the Church echoes that of Zola only as a mirror image – for whereas Zola evolves towards a secular utopia from which all vestiges of Catholicism are progressively banished, Bourget comes increasingly to accept the Church as the one certain solution to individual, social and national decadence. Where Zola sees domination and repression, Bourget sees order and stability; and the orthodoxy that Zola condemns as limiting human intellect and creativity appears to Bourget as a source of wisdom and regeneration. On a wider scale, Zola is clearly representative of anti-clerical thought and aspirations, and Bourget situates himself in a hierarchy of Counter-revolutionary theory embracing past masters and contemporary adherents.

On a national level, the ecclesiastical order so fervently attacked by Zola was to Bourget essential to the health of society. After his initial fascination with decadence, Bourget's return to the Catholic fold was seen by some critics as surprising – Catholic

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<sup>30</sup> Zola, *Rome*, p.684

<sup>31</sup> M. Maione «Zola face à la Ville Eternelle» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.60 (1986) p.159

<sup>32</sup> A. Dezalay «Mythe et histoire: présence de Rome chez Zola» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.54 (1980) p.159

<sup>33</sup> P. Tortonese «Rome décadente» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.72 (1998) p. 226

<sup>34</sup> Zola, *Rome*, p.995

sympathisers at *le Moniteur Universel* were favourably impressed, but Léon Bloy was critical of his religiosity,<sup>35</sup> and others dismissed his “conversion” as being motivated by a desire for order alone. Charles Maurras commented that Bourget was undoubtedly fleeing from anarchy - «il devait le fuir jusqu’à Rome.»<sup>36</sup> The critic Jules Sageret was more sceptical still, attributing Bourget’s return to the Church to entirely cynical and worldly motives, and commented sardonically that:

«M. Bourget, avant tout, a été converti par le monde.»<sup>37</sup>

Bourget, he explained, was interested only in becoming associated with the aristocratic way of life, and so his conversion can best be described as a sycophantic move to align himself with tradition and the monarchy.<sup>38</sup>

But a close examination of Bourget’s works clearly reveals Sageret’s suspicions to be largely unfounded – can Bourget’s conversion be explained as calculating when it is so evidently, but unconsciously, evolving throughout his literary career? Even his *Essais*, imbued as they are with a fascination for decadence, betray an awareness of the need for both faith and order to resolve the problems of nihilism and dilettantism. Likewise, Zola himself remarked after reading *Cosmopolis* that Bourget was heading for a renewal of faith, «non pas même vers la foi vague du déiste, mais vers la foi catholique, solide encore, réglée par le dogme.»<sup>39</sup>

But above all, Sageret’s criticism fails to take account of Bourget’s very genuine concern to help resolve the question of national decadence: his support of the Church is thus not just an ostentatious personal stance, but rather an earnest attempt to

<sup>35</sup> C. Garret *Paul Bourget and the Politics of Traditionalism* (University of California, Los Angeles, 1993) p.323

<sup>36</sup> C. Maurras *Triptyque de Paul Bourget 1895 – 1900 – 1923* (Paris, Librairie de la Revue Française, 1931) p.38

<sup>37</sup> J. Sageret *Les Grands Convertis* (Paris, Société de Mercure de France, 1906) p.13

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40

<sup>39</sup> Zola, *Chronique – Paul Bourget*, p.673

provide a much needed national solution.

Certainly Bourget does emphasise the importance of order, and in so doing is widely representative of others who saw the Church as a means of reinforcing the social hierarchy of a traditional society, such as Comte Albert de Mun, and the Marquis René de la Tour du Pin.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the Church's social role was one that Bourget emphasised not only in his novels, but also in public at the *Assemblée de l'Oeuvre des Campagnes*, a conference held on 31 May 1922. Here, Bourget praised the parish priest for his encouragement of the spiritual and family life of the *paysan*, and above all for his support of tradition and social harmony:

«Le clocher, c'est la tradition, et toute nation est forte dans la mesure où elle est dans sa tradition...Le Christianisme, éducateur des âmes, est aussi créateur des citoyens utiles...»<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Zola, Paul Bourget maintained a constant and lasting respect for the Church hierarchy; admitting that the priesthood was somewhat too isolated from contemporary society,<sup>42</sup> but nonetheless praising the understanding of human nature to be gained from the role of confessor. He even expressed his support of Pius IX, «ce grand pape, surgi au moment où la défense du dogme réclamait l'intransigeance d'une autorité fervente, perspicace et inexorable.»<sup>43</sup>

But Bourget was also fully aware of the dangers of supporting the Church for the sake of tradition alone, as is evident from his highly perceptive portrayal of Louis Savignan in *Le Démon de Midi*. While demonstrating his suspicion of the "illusory" modernism of Jacques, who echoes the idealism of Zola's Pierre Froment in his hopes to reconcile the Church with democracy, Bourget is equally sceptical of the faith of

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<sup>40</sup> Garret, *Paul Bourget*, p.283

<sup>41</sup> Bourget, quoted in C. Baussan, *De Frédéric le Play à Paul Bourget* (Paris, Flammarion, 1935) p.211

<sup>42</sup> P. Bourget *Le Démon de Midi* (Paris, Plon, 1914) Vol.2 p.373

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Vol.2 p.74

Savignan, «pétri d'idées d'obéissance et de tradition»<sup>44</sup> and unable to resist the temptations of immorality.

For not only does he support the Church as a cure to national decadence, but Bourget also advocates Catholicism as proving both direction and regeneration in an individual context. Bourget's *Essais* are marked by occasional and threatening doubts – after a detailed study of Flaubert's nihilism he begins to wonder whether «cette formidable nausée des plus magnifiques intelligences devant les vains efforts de la vie a-t-elle raison?»<sup>45</sup> But even at this stage he is deeply preoccupied with the need for faith: «la croyance absolue, entière, inattaquable.»<sup>46</sup> His novel *Un Saint*, for example, describes the return to faith of the cynical dilettante, Philippe Dubois, through his contact with the simple, direct faith of Dom Griffi, and Bourget concludes with a touch of irony that:

«La vieille religion catholique avait prévu même les analystes et leur salut possible.»<sup>47</sup>

In complete contradiction to Zola, Bourget also affirms the compatibility of faith and Science, though in so doing he is not necessarily representative of Catholic thought as a whole. In the introduction to his *Essais*, he argues that the recognition of the need for religion is surely the rational result of any study of human nature and society<sup>48</sup> – and he later explains that Science is not necessarily incompatible because it makes no concrete claims in the metaphysical sphere. But there is no doubt that, unlike Zola, he saw religion as ultimately superior. As Joseph de Bonne has argued, Bourget

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<sup>44</sup> Bourget, *Le Démon de Midi*, Vol.1 p.42

<sup>45</sup> P. Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Plon, 1899) p.249

<sup>46</sup> P. Bourget *Un Saint* (London, Macmillan, 1907) p.41

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.44

<sup>48</sup> Bourget, *Essais*, Préface de 1899, p. xii

did not believe man to be intrinsically good<sup>49</sup> – nor, unlike Zola, did he believe in a perfectible society – and Catholicism thus appeared as the supreme wisdom, and as the necessary “government” of unruly human instincts. Equally, it contributed to the psychic rootedness of the individual within a family and social context, and was thus invaluable for regeneration:

«Une religion assure la communauté des espérances par delà des séparations suprêmes.»<sup>50</sup>

Theoretically, then, the opposition between Bourget and Zola would appear to be complete: there would seem to be little room for compromise between the vision of the Church as regeneration and the condemnation of Catholicism as decadence. How does this relate to the wider conflict between Catholics and Republicans, and is there any degree of ambiguity?

Firstly, it must be emphasised that the doctrinal opposition between the Catholic Bourget and the anti-clerical Zola was a very real feature of the wider conflict between the two sides, and is an important element in explaining the intensity and constant resurgence of antagonism. Furthermore, both Zola and Bourget were strongly representative of a large number of fervent opponents. But the wider picture is not always as clearly defined. Not only was there ambiguity on a deeper level, where allegiances were not always as fierce or as cogently formulated, and where divisions were complex and many sided, but even between the most fiercely opposed there was often a surprising similarity.

Official statistics of the 1870s divided the French population into 35 million Catholics, 600,000 Protestants, and 80,000 freethinkers<sup>51</sup> – but such figures cannot

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<sup>49</sup> J. de Bonne *La Pensée de Paul Bourget* (Paris, Editions Sociales et Politiques IX, Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1913) p.44

<sup>50</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.233

<sup>51</sup> McManners, *Church and State*, p.5

necessarily be equated with the degree of opposition. Not least, important decisions on anti-clerical issues invariably won a large majority of the votes – which would not have been possible within the simple framework of a Catholic-Republican divide. Clearly, although this division was a meaningful one in theory, it is evident that Republicanism and Catholicism were not always mutually exclusive in practice.<sup>52</sup> Just as there were atheists who supported the Church as a bulwark of social order,<sup>53</sup> so too were there Catholics who were wary of supporting clerical policies. Zola was suspicious of the superstition of Lourdes – so too were many Catholics. Furthermore, divisions within both sides were constantly shifting. Abbot Gasquet wrote in 1905 that “we can all of us remember the time, not so long ago, when not to be a supporter of the monarchy and monarchical ideas was regarded by our French friends as being the mark of an indifferent and even bad Catholic”<sup>54</sup> – but implied that divisions had become considerably more complex since 1870. The Church was certainly far from monolithic – and as Bernard Reardon argues,<sup>55</sup> Catholic attitudes could be remarkably diverse, with important conflict between liberals and reactionaries. Equally, as Abbot Gasquet admitted with due regret:

“I fear it must be said that the curse of the Church in France has been, and is, apathy and indifference.”<sup>56</sup>

Convinced intellectuals like Zola and Bourget expressed widely held views, but inevitably the more fervent were also the more vocal, thus obscuring the fact that the Catholic-Republican divide was not always as bitter as it might appear in public

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<sup>52</sup> McManners, *Church and State*, p.14

<sup>53</sup> Bourget wrote in *Le Démon de Midi* that «le sociologue qui disait de lui-même *je suis clérical et athée* énonçait une formule qui n'est un paradoxe qu'en apparence.» (Vol.1 p.77)

<sup>54</sup> Abbot Gasquet “The religious troubles in France” p.21

<sup>55</sup> B. Reardon *Liberalism and Tradition: Aspects of Catholic Thought in Nineteenth-Century France* (CUP, 1975) Introduction, p.viii

<sup>56</sup> Abbot Gasquet “The religious troubles” p.19



debate. Indeed, John McManners argues that some of the extreme anti-clerical measures of the 1880s were the result of the original intentions spiralling so far out of control that they were far from being fully representative. Catholics and Republicans were in fact in considerable consensus over questions of education until the measures of the moderate Jules Ferry were taken further than intended by more fanatical anti-clericals.<sup>57</sup> Moderates were more likely to keep silent, whereas fanatics continued to propagate the established stereotypes and thus to sustain the irreconcilable conflict.

A further and equally important element of ambiguity is that, although Catholics and Republicans might be opposed on the question of the Church in its narrowest sense, their positions were sometimes more ambiguous on the issue of religious sentiment and morality. The relationship between anti-clericalism and morality was, as Zeldin points out, complex and even paradoxical. For although anti-clerical sentiment often emerged in reaction to the intrusive nature of Catholic doctrine, the moral textbooks produced for use in secular schools were almost identical to the catechisms that they replaced.<sup>58</sup> Zola's own conservative morality, particularly concerning the family,<sup>59</sup> is also widely representative of bourgeois Republican attitudes.

Concerning the importance of faith and renewal, it so happened that some of the most prominent Third Republican intellectuals were also atheists,<sup>60</sup> but this was not necessarily always the case. The challenges to positivism and scientism, as well as bringing a revised attitude towards decadence and the possibility of regeneration, were also highly influential in the religious sphere. As Paolo Tortonese points out, by the 1890s both Bourget and Zola were stressing the need to oppose decadence with faith:

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<sup>57</sup> McManners, *Church and State*, p.58

<sup>58</sup> Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, Vol.2 p.1028

<sup>59</sup> Emphasised by Brian Nelson in *Zola and the Bourgeoisie*, p.56

<sup>60</sup> Price, *A Social History*, p.302

«Du point de vue du diagnostic, Zola et Bourget ne diffèrent pas vraiment. L'un et l'autre croient à la nécessité absolue d'une foi.»<sup>61</sup>

For Zola's initial condemnation of the metaphysical world in his harshly positivist *Le Roman Expérimental* began, when modified by the new intellectual climate, to give way to a recognition of a human necessity for belief, if not established religion.

«Je veux bien que la religion, le sentiment religieux soit éternel»<sup>62</sup> he wrote in 1896, and in his analysis of Bourget's *Cosmopolis* he was even prepared to admit the personal benefits of faith in Catholicism:

«Certes, la foi catholique est un solide bâton de voyage, quand on a la chance de la posséder. Je suis convaincu, moi aussi, que rien n'est meilleur que de croire et que la foi résout la question du bonheur.»<sup>63</sup>

Coming from an anti-clerical who saw it as his duty to destroy the Church, such an admission might seem contradictory – but Zola was not unrepresentative in his recognition of this fundamental need. The late nineteenth century witnessed some surprising conversions – the founder of positivism, Auguste Comte, ended up as an apologist for Catholicism,<sup>64</sup> and on 1 January 1895 Ferdinand Brunetière admitted that morality was impossible without religious support.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, positivism itself, although in essence a harsh interpretation of life, had often previously coexisted with a curious religiosity – “a kind of pantheism and fatalism” as Renouvier referred to it in 1868<sup>66</sup> – ironically mystical, considering the religion that it sought to replace.

<sup>61</sup> Tortonese, «Rome décadente» p.234

<sup>62</sup> Zola «La science et le catholicisme» p.838

<sup>63</sup> Zola, *Chronique – Paul Bourget*, p.673

<sup>64</sup> V. Giraud «Catholicisme et Positivisme – les théories» in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* Vol. 44 (1938) p.129

<sup>65</sup> Reardon, *Liberalism and Tradition*, p.222

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in McManners, *Church and State*, p.17

Ferdinand Brunetière commented – prior to his own conversion – that Zola had abandoned Christianity but retained its vocabulary,<sup>67</sup> and the charge is not without foundation. Indeed, some critics have taken it to extremes: Pierre Aubéry draws on the explicit parallels in *Germinal* between the socialist faith of the miners and the conviction of the early Christians to make a somewhat exaggerated portrait of Etienne as a Messiah.<sup>68</sup> Michel Berta takes this further still in the interest of a tenuous comparison between the anarchist Souvarine and John the Baptist.<sup>69</sup> Such claims may be questionable, but there is no doubt that Zola's secular *Evangiles* of Work, Fertility, Justice and Truth were a conscious search for new ideals and new absolutes, even if the method of achieving this ideal society always remained somewhat nebulous. As Zola commented in *Rome*:

«A cette fin de siècle...le sentiment religieux s'est réveillé, inquiet, tourmenté d'idéal et d'infini...Les religions peuvent disparaître, le sentiment religieux en créera de nouvelles, même avec la science.»<sup>70</sup>

Could it be argued, then, that to a certain extent Zola and his fellow anti-clericals were simply *fanatiques à rebours*? Zola criticised the Church for its authoritarian hierarchy, hindrance of free thought and general intolerance, but could these adjectives not also be applied to the anti-clericals themselves?

Perhaps the most fundamental reason why convinced Catholics and Republicans, despite their ambiguities, remained so fervently and irreconcilably opposed was because they were essentially too similar. For here were two ideologies, two faiths, and two groups of evangelists concerned not so much to be reconciled as to convert each other – and with such ardent polemicists on both sides, the lack of easy

<sup>67</sup> H. Guillemin *Zola: Légende et Vérité* (Paris, Editions d'Utopie, 1979) p.128

<sup>68</sup> Aubéry «Imitations de Jésus» p.41

<sup>69</sup> M. Berta «Le non-dit religieux dans *Germinal*» in *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* no.59 (1985) p.94

<sup>70</sup> Zola, *Rome*, p.535

compromise is more than understandable. Jules Sageret commented defensively in 1906 that although the Church was accused of being overly authoritarian, it was in fact more liberal than its enemies, and openly wondered why the rift between Catholics and Republicans should be so great.<sup>71</sup> But the real problem was clearly that each side could be as intransigent as the other. In May 1868, Sainte-Beuve described the various anti-clerical groups seeking “illumination” as being united by their determination to “be freed from an absolute authority and a blind submission”<sup>72</sup> – yet what authority more absolute than the State, when it decreed that only Republican orthodoxy could freely be demonstrated? And what submission more blind than that required towards the laws enforcing secularisation, and outlawing freedom of choice in education? As Catholic polemicists were only too swift to point out, the supposedly liberal principles of the Revolution had blatantly been disregarded, and it would appear that:

“M.Combes means that the State is entitled to dictate to its citizens when and how much they may believe, and to control not only their outward acts, but also the inward convictions of the soul.”<sup>73</sup>

Zola was certainly not exempt from the intolerance that he condemned – his *Evangelies* have frequently been remarked upon as being rigidly prescriptive, forcing his personal gospel on the unsuspecting reader in a manner almost tyrannical<sup>74</sup> - and Zola himself confessed his determination to convert his opponents by preaching Science just as they preached Christianity.<sup>75</sup>

As Bourget remarked in his novel *L'Etape*, «on ne peut pas être impartial dans les temps de combat»<sup>76</sup> - the problem with discussing the Church and decadence was

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<sup>71</sup> Sageret, *Les Grands Convertis*, p.9

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in McManners, *Church and State*, p.18

<sup>73</sup> Viscount Llandaff “M. Combes and the French Catholics” in *The Crisis in the Church in France* p.13

<sup>74</sup> Baguley «Du récit polémique» p.114

<sup>75</sup> E. Zola «Protestantisme» in *Une Campagne*, p.602

<sup>76</sup> Bourget, *L'Etape*, p.349

that it was impossible to be objective. The Catholic-Republican divide, though complex, was thus an inescapable one, reinforced by generations of mutual suspicion, propaganda, and misunderstanding. In theory, the doctrines subscribed to by Bourget and Zola were incompatible, and the ambiguities that characterised the conflict in practice were often obscured by the more fervent and vocal opponents on either side, few of whom actually wanted compromise or reconciliation. And perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the problem was that Zola and Bourget, so similar in their approach to decadence in other domains, were too similar in this domain also. With each determined to preach his own gospel, and convinced of the self-evidence of his own ideals and absolutes, the two were destined in this area to remain paradoxically parallel – but irreconcilable.

## CONCLUSION

It was in 1898, at a certain *Dîner Balzac* held at the Restaurant Durand in Paris, that Zola asked Bourget to support his manifesto «J'accuse.»<sup>1</sup> Bourget politely refused – and thus began the rupture between two literary friends who had come to subscribe to two very different social and political philosophies. «Je crains bien que nous ne soyons à des bouts opposés, comme goût et comme croyance»<sup>2</sup> commented Zola to Bourget in 1897 - and indeed the Dreyfus affair that was to end their correspondence further reinforced their allegiances to Catholic and Republican factions respectively.

Zola, whose unexpected death in 1902 was to provoke mixed reactions to his role in French public life, was nonetheless established as an uncompromising, unsubtle, and unforgettable Republican. Despite the tension between his deterministic vision of progress and his intense irritation at the inadequacies of a supposedly democratic regime, he remained true to his conviction that «une évolution emporte tous les peuples vers la République.»<sup>3</sup> Equally, although his later works betray some hesitation about the ability of Science to explain all mystery, he continued, even in the late 1890s, to maintain that «la science est la toute-puissance»<sup>4</sup> and to intensify his anti-clerical battle against the Church. He is certainly best remembered – and most respected – as a Republican writer with a fervent and unswerving determination to defend *la vérité* in all domains, and François Mitterrand has further highlighted Zola's importance in the formation of Republican ideology.<sup>5</sup> Emile Faguet's prediction that

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<sup>1</sup> F. Pascal «Essais et notices: Paul Bourget et les écrivains de son temps» in La Revue des Deux Mondes Vol. 39 (May-June 1937) p. 919

<sup>2</sup> C. Becker «Zola à Paul Bourget: trois lettres inédites» in Les Cahiers Naturalistes no. 73 (1999) p. 49

<sup>3</sup> E. Zola *Une Campagne* (*Oeuvres Complètes* Vol. 14) p.569

<sup>4</sup> E. Zola «Science et catholicisme» in *Nouvelle Campagne* (*Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 14) p.839

<sup>5</sup> F. Mitterrand «Politique et littérature» in Les Cahiers Naturalistes no. 51 (1977) pp.5-17

posterity would marvel at his mediocrity was not, in the end, to be proved correct.<sup>6</sup>

Bourget's contribution to the development of Right wing thought is equally significant. Although criticised by Edouard Drumont for his evident Jewish sympathies,<sup>7</sup> he nevertheless condemned the proposed second trial for Dreyfus in the over-riding interests of national order and security. He also gave clear intellectual support to the *Action Française* movement, wary of its violent tactics, but convinced of its ability to realise his political and social solutions. His encouragement was warmly reciprocated – the publication of *L'Étape* was marked by a banquet in his honour; Charles Maurras celebrated his support of national and ethnic pride,<sup>8</sup> and Léon Daudet's obituary praised him as conservative in the most positive sense of the word.<sup>9</sup> During the First World War, Bourget continued his devotion to the cause of order and patriotism, and although some critics during the 1920s and 1930s regarded him as an out-dated monarchist, many obituaries emphasised his importance as:

«Un défenseur de la tradition, de la famille, de l'organisation sociale basée sur la foi religieuse et sur les principes d'autorité.»<sup>10</sup>

Yet the opposition between Bourget and Zola - as between bourgeois Catholics and Republicans on a wider scale - could conceal both consensus and ambiguity, particularly with reference to the question of national decadence. A comparison between the two writers not only illuminates Theodore Zeldin's argument that Catholics and anti-clericals could share surprisingly similar mentalities,<sup>11</sup> but it also gives an invaluable insight into developing intellectual trends which were to achieve both full and turbulent expression in the twentieth century.

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<sup>6</sup> E. Faguet *Zola* (Paris, Imprimerie A. Eymérout, 1902) p.30

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in C. Garret *Paul Bourget and the Politics of Traditionalism* (Los Angeles, 1993) p.296

<sup>8</sup> C. Maurras *Triptyque de Paul Bourget* (Paris, Librairie de la Revue Française, 1931) p.42

<sup>9</sup> *Action Française*, 25 December 1935 (Colindale Library Microfiches M.F.4 )

<sup>10</sup> André Thérive in *Le Temps*, 26 December 1935 (Colindale M.F.69)

<sup>11</sup> T. Zeldin *France 1848-1945* (OUP, 1980) Vol. 2 p.994

As Zeldin further argues, the real difference is not so much between Catholics and anti-clerical Republicans as between those who care about the questions of life, death and conscience, and those who do not<sup>12</sup> – and Zola and Bourget were unusual in devoting such passion to the systematic study of these problems. They were intellectuals, and it was the intellectual community of France that was most preoccupied with the threat of decadence. Equally, they were individuals whose idiosyncratic evolution was not always in line with Catholic and Republican thought respectively. But such idiosyncrasies are inevitable, and as Paul Bourget himself remarked, « pour acquérir une valeur typique, il faut être le plus individuel possible. »<sup>13</sup> For not only were intellectual analyses of degeneration widely influential in social, cultural and political spheres, but the whole question of decadence was more than an abstract myth among idle philosophers. The idea of decadence may have achieved particular prominence in the years 1870 to 1900, but its relationship with the Third Republic was not so swiftly concluded. The focus on decadence that had characterised that generation began to receive uneasy criticism in the 1930s, and Maurice Martin du Gard<sup>14</sup> angrily denounced the « bourgeoisie renfermée, défiante et timide...qui n'aime rien autant que de croire que la France est perdue. Les fils de cette bourgeoisie nous la feront oublier, je l'espère! »<sup>15</sup> When the Republic finally collapsed inwards in 1940, it seemed to acknowledge its own degeneration, and the Vichy regime sought to replace the perceived moral, social and cultural decadence with new vigour and certainty. The methods that were employed, the emphasis on rural tradition and the faith in a strong

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<sup>12</sup> Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, Vol.2 p.994

<sup>13</sup> P. Bourget *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris, Plon, 1899) p.48

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Martin du Gard (1896-1970) was editor of *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* between 1923 and 1936.

<sup>15</sup> *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 28 December 1935 (Colindale M.F. 215)



national leader who asserted that «la terre, elle ne ment pas»<sup>16</sup> often had visible roots in the reactions to decadence of the generation of Zola and Bourget.

Certainly, the attitudes of the two writers to democratic, social and racial degeneration reveal a surprising level of consensus across political and religious boundaries. The editor of *Le Moniteur Universel* proclaimed on 5 May 1885 that «nous n'avons eu avec les républicains qu'un gouvernement de sectaires, de prodiges et de politiciens sans expérience»<sup>17</sup> - and such views were characteristic of critics on both Left and Right. Zola's journalistic *Campagne* and Bourget's *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* together indicate considerable discontent with a regime of constant compromise, mediocrity, and political stagnation. Although proposing different solutions, both criticise the endless and fruitless party conflicts, challenging the theory and practice of universal suffrage, and demonstrating a restless longing for "scientific" government and strong leadership. The widespread and influential nature of such sentiments is particularly evident in the degree of support attracted by General Boulanger. Indeed, the comparison between Bourget and Zola also highlights the relevance of Zeev Sternhell's hypothesis that radical philosophies on both Left and Right at the turn of the century were rooted in a common dissatisfaction with liberal democracy.<sup>18</sup>

This bourgeois consensus over fears of decadence and disorder was to some extent also evident in the social sphere. Zola and Bourget's reactions to the practice – though not the theory – of socialism largely support Sanford Elwitt's contention that the need for Republican defence could unite diverse and opposing sections of the

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<sup>16</sup> Marshall Pétain, quoted in C. Faure, *Le Projet Culturel de Vichy* (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1989) p.17

<sup>17</sup> *Le Moniteur Universel*, 5 May 1885 (Colindale M.F. 17)

<sup>18</sup> Z. Sternhell *La Droite Révolutionnaire: Les Origines Françaises du Fascisme 1885-1914* (Paris, Seuil, 1978) p.403

bourgeoisie.<sup>19</sup> Zola claimed at the end of his career to endorse socialism – but his vision was resolutely paternalistic, and despite admiring brutal truths and vast conflicts, he shared an innate bourgeois fear of unrestrained forces that led him to a paradoxical and uneasy allegiance to his class. «Dans les crises décisives, le plus paradoxal novateur redevient toujours l'homme de sa caste»<sup>20</sup> Bourget commented – and a link could certainly be drawn between the two writers' common reaction to the violence of the Commune and their subsequent fear and anxiety when portraying images of revolutionary fervour and chaos.

Reactions to racial degeneration indicate still more clearly that fears of decadence could be shared regardless of political allegiance. Zola and Bourget were both representative of their literary and philosophical generation in their adherence to an intellectual framework of heredity, race and milieu as a means of analysing character and action, and shared largely similar anxieties about the dissipation of racial energy. Furthermore, they illuminate an important area of consensus between Catholics and Republicans in their common emphasis on the importance of the family, and on the individual's responsibility to contribute to the wider question of national regeneration. Within this context, both writers also reflect emerging intellectual trends, especially the emphasis on the energy and vitality to be regained from a closer relationship with regional traditions and with the earth itself. Zola's vision was more cosmic, Bourget's more closely paralleled by the mystical nationalism of Maurice Barrès, but many of the fundamental theories were shared by both Left and Right, and were to become prominent in the debate on decadence during the Vichy regime.

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<sup>19</sup> S. Elwitt *The Third Republic Defended* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1986) p.7

<sup>20</sup> P. Bourget *Le Démon de Midi* (Paris, Plon, 1914) Vol. 2 p. 174

But the Zeldin hypothesis can only be taken so far – for if Zola and Bourget shared a common determination to define and discuss decadence, they shared an equally fervent desire to resolve it, and it was this common commitment that led them to such very different solutions. Although the 1880s in particular saw a surprising degree of underlying consensus between the two writers, their ideas began to diverge increasingly radically as they became convinced by their respective utopias. Zeldin may suggest that there were areas of consensus even in the religious domain, and that the real problem between Catholics and Republicans was one of communication,<sup>21</sup> but the differences between them could not be so easily solved. There was, of course, some ambiguity in that Catholics and Republicans were not mutually exclusive – but in fact the most convinced adherents were irreconcilably opposed because of the very similarity of mentality that sometimes united them in other spheres. Neither Catholics nor anti-clericals could really accept the existence of pluralism, and the rigorous orthodoxy of the Church was ironically often paralleled by that of the State. Lack of communication was undoubtedly a contributing factor to the violence of the conflict, but it was not the full explanation – not least because the revolutionary legacy of opposition was far from suppressed. Republicans were keen to see 1870 as the fulfilment of the Revolution – here, they argued, was a lasting Republic after a series of transitory and inglorious regimes, a Republic that succeeded in establishing its orthodoxy in the hearts and minds of the people. But was this really the final victory? The continuing opposition between the rival factions to which Zola and Bourget were so fervently allied seems to suggest otherwise.

Emile Zola and Paul Bourget both agreed that 1870 was a question mark over the future of France – but their eventual answers to the question were very different,

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<sup>21</sup> Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, Vol. 2 p.983

even if their analyses of the problem could be surprisingly similar. Together, they defied a decadent democracy, sharing fears and preoccupations about political failings, social disorder and racial degeneration, but veering sharply apart in their proposed solutions to the perceived national crisis. Together, they reveal the inescapable nature of the revolutionary legacy, a legacy constantly frustrating attempted compromise, and confusing the quest for French identity. And together they demonstrate the complexity of a regime, the depths of conflict and consensus within a divided nation, with a significance that encompasses both past and future.

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